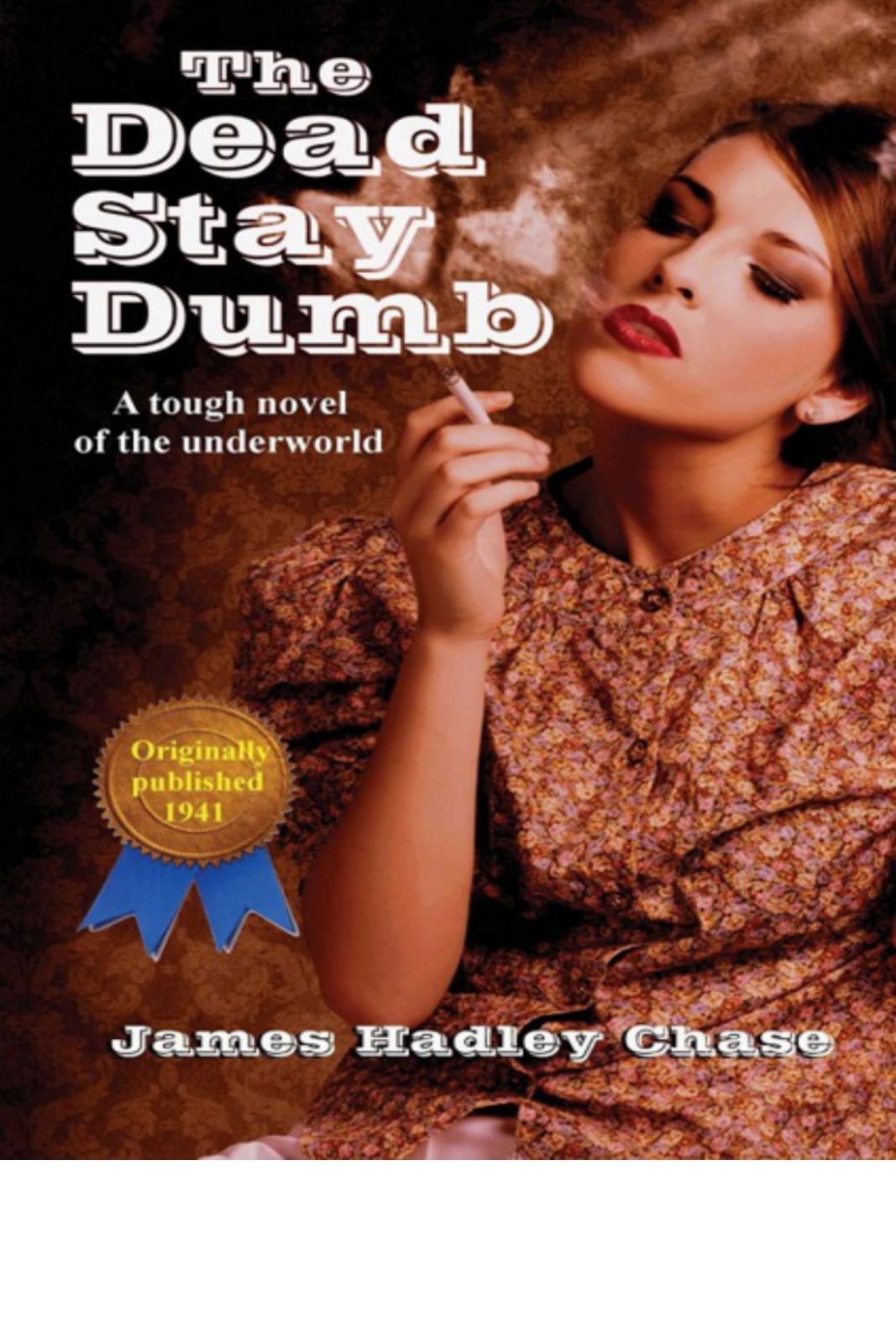


The Dead Stay Dumb

A tough novel
of the underworld

A woman with dark hair and red lips is shown from the chest up, wearing a patterned dress. She is holding a cigarette in her right hand, which is raised to her mouth. A plume of smoke is visible. The background is a textured, reddish-brown surface.

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James Hadley Chase

THE DEAD STAY DUMB
JAMES HADLEY CHASE

1939

part one

There were three of them. The bigness of the room hid them from the sun, burning up the road outside. They sat round a table, close to the bar, drinking corn whisky.

George, behind the bar, held a swab in his thick fingers, and listened to them talk. Every now and then he nodded his square head and said, "You're dead right, mister." He just "yessed" them along—that was all.

Walcott uneasily fingered a coin in his vest pocket. It was all the money he had, and it was worrying him. Freedman and Wilson had stood him a round, and now it was coming to his turn. He couldn't rise to it. His weak, freckled face began to glisten. He touched his scrubby moustache with a dirty thumb and moved restlessly.

Wilson said, "Cain't go no place these days but there's some lousy bum lookin' for a free flop an' a bite of somethin' to eat. This town's lousy with bums."

Walcott said quickly, "Ain't it gettin' hot in here? Seems like it's too hot to drink even."

Freedman and Wilson looked at him suspiciously. Then Freedman drained his glass and set it on the table with a little bang. "Ain't never too hot for me to drink," he said.

George leant over the bar. "Shall I fill 'em up, mister?" he said to Walcott.

Walcott hesitated, looked at the two blank, coldly suspicious faces of the other two, and nodded. He put the coin on the counter. He did it reluctantly, as if the parting with it was a physical hurt. He said, "Not for me . . . jest two."

There was a heavy silence, while George poured the liquor. The other two knew it was Walcott's last coin, but they wouldn't let him off. They were determined to have everything they could from him.

George picked up the coin, looked at it, spun it in his thick fingers, and flipped it into the till. Walcott followed every movement with painful intensity. He screwed round a little in his chair, so that he

couldn't see the others drinking. He put his hands over his eyes.

Freedman turned his red fat face and winked at Wilson. He said, "It's only the Kikes that have the dough."

George said ponderously, "Yeah, you're right, mister."

"Sure I'm right," Freedman said, sipping his corn whisky. "Take a look at Abe Goldberg, ain't he got most of the dough in the town?"

Walcott turned his head. His pale eyes lit up. "That guy's stinking with it," he said. "Hell of a lot of good it does him, too."

Wilson shrugged. "His fat cow sews up his pockets," he said. "He don't drink, he don't smoke, he don't do nothin'."

Freedman winked again. "You're wrong there," he said. "But what he does do don't cost him anything." They laughed.

The three-quarter swing doors of the saloon pushed open, and a girl came in. She stood hesitating in the patch of sunlight at the door, trying to see in the dimness of the room. Then she came over to the bar.

George said, "Morning, Miss Hogan, how's your Pa?"

The girl said, "Gimme a pint of Scotch."

George reached under the counter and slapped down a bottle in front of her. She gave him a bill, and while he was getting change she looked round the room. She saw the three, sitting watching her. They sat like waxworks, suspended in everything but her. She looked slowly from one to the other, then she tossed her head and turned back to the bar.

"I ain't got all day," she said. "Stir your stumps, can't you?"

George put the money on the counter. Aw, Miss Hogan—" he began.

She picked up the money and the bottle quickly. "Forget it," she said, and walked out.

The three turned in their chairs as she went, their eyes fixed in a bright, unblinking stare. They watched her push the swing doors and disappear into the hot, sunlit road.

There was a lengthy silence.

Then Freedman said, "She ain't got a thing under that dress, did you see?"

Walcott still stared at the door, as if hoping she'd return. He nervously wiped his hands on a cap he held on his knee.

Wilson said, "If I were Butch I'd take the hide off her back . . . the little whore."

George said, "Ain't she a looker? There ain't another skirt in this dump like her, ain't that right?"

Walcott dragged his eyes away from the door. "Yeah," he said: "See the way she came in? Standin' in the sunlight like that, showing all she got. That girl's a tease. She's going to get into trouble one of these days, you see."

Freedman leered. "You don't know nothin'," he said. "You can't teach that babe a thing. I'm tellin' you, she's hot. I've seen her at night with one of those engineer fellows in the fields."

The other two jerked their chairs forward. They leant over the table. George looked at them. They had suddenly lowered their voices. He couldn't hear what they were saying. He hesitated, then, feeling himself excluded, he moved further down the bar, and began to polish glasses. Anyway, he told himself, it wasn't too healthy talking about old Butch Hogan's daughter Old Butch was still dangerous.

A long, starved shadow of a man tell across the floor of the saloon, making George look up sharply.

The man stood in the doorway holding the swing doors apart with his hands. A battered, greasy hat pulled over his face hid his eyes. George looked at him, saw the frayed, stained coat, the threadbare trousers and the broken shoes. He automatically reached forward and put the cover on the free lunch bowl.

"Another goddam bum," he thought.

The man came in with a limping shuffle. He looked at the three at the table, but they didn't see him. They were still wrangling about the girl. George leant forward a little over the bar and spat in the brass spittoon. Then having expressed his attitude, he straightened up and went on polishing a glass.

"The name's Dillon," the man said slowly.

George said, "Yeah? Ain't nothin' to me What's yours?"

"Gimme a glass of water." Dillon's voice was deep and gritty.

George said, his face hostile, "We don't serve water here."

"But you'll serve me an' like it," Dillon said. "D'you hear me, punk?—I said water."

George reached under the counter for his club, but Dillon suddenly pushed up his hat and leant forward.

"You ain't startin' anythin'," he said.

The cold black eyes that looked at George made the barman suddenly shiver. He took his hand away with a jerk. Dillon continued to stare at him.

There were no guts in George. He was big, and every now and then he had to smack someone down with his club. He did it without thinking. This bum was different. George knew he'd get nowhere being tough with a guy like this.

"Here, take the water, an' get the hell outta here." He pushed a bottle of water across the wood in Dillon's direction.

The three at the table stopped talking about Hogan's daughter and turned in their chairs. Freedman said, "Well, by God! Here's another bum blown in."

George began to sweat. He walked down the counter to Freedman, shaking his head warningly.

Dillon took a long pull from the water bottle.

Sure of himself, because of his two companions, Freedman said, "This punk stinks. Get him outta here, George."

Dillon put the bottle down on the counter and turned his head. His white, clay-like face startled Freedman. Dillon said, "You're the kind of heel that gets slugged some dark night."

Freedman lost some of his nerve. He turned his back and began talking to Walcott.

Just then Abe Goldberg came in. He was a little fat Jew, maybe about sixty, with a great hooked beak and two sharp little eyes. His mouth

turned up at the corners, giving him a kindly look. He nodded at George and ordered a ginger ale. Dillon looked at him closely. Abe was shabby, but he wore a thick rope of gold across his chest. Dillon eyed that with interest. Abe met his eye. He said, "You a stranger around here?"

Dillon began to shuffle to the door. "Don't you worry about me," he said.

Abe looked him over, sighed, and put his glass on the wood. He walked over to Dillon, looking up at him. "If you could use a meal," he said, "go over to the store across the way. My wife'll fix you something."

Dillon stood looking at Abe, his cold eyes searching the little Jew's face. Then he said, "Yeah, I guess I'll do that."

The three at the table, and George, watched him shuffle out of the saloon. Freedman said, "That's a bad guy all right. There's somethin' about that guy."

George mopped his face with the swab. He was mighty glad to see Dillon go. "You gotta be careful with those bums, Mr. Goldberg," he said. "You don't know how tough hoboes are."

Abe drained his glass, then shook his head. "That guy's all right. He's hungry," was all he said. He crossed the street and went into the store.

Abe Goldberg was proud of that store. It was all right. It was a good store. You could get most things from Goldberg's Stores. Maybe you did have to pay a little more, but it was convenient. All under one root. It saved a walk in the heat, so you expected to pay a little more. Anyway, Abe made a good thing out of it. He didn't toss his money about, nor did he yell about it. He just socked it away in the bank, and said nothing. Most people liked Abe. He was a little sharp, but then you expected that too, so you haggled with him. Sometimes, if you haggled long enough, you got what you wanted cheaper. Abe's joint was the only one in town that you could haggle in. And sometimes people like to haggle.

Abe walked into his shady cool store, sniffed at the various smells, and smiled to himself. His wife, who came a little older than he, shook her black curls at him. She was fat, and she had big half-circles of damp under her arms, but Abe loved her a lot.

"Goldberg," she said, "what's the big idea, sending bums into my

kitchen?"

Abe lifted his narrow shoulders and spread out his hands. "That guy was hungry," he said. "What could I do?"

He lifted the trap on the counter and passed through. His small hand patted his wife's great arm. "You know how it is," he said softly; "we've been hungry Give him a break, Rosey, won't you?"

She nodded her head. "It's always the same. Bum after bum comes into this town and they all make tracks for you. I tell you, Goldberg, you're a sucker." Her big, fleshy smile delighted him.

"You're a hard woman, Rosey," he said, patting her arm again.

Dillon was eating in the kitchen, intent and morose, when Abe went in. He glanced up, keeping his head lowered over his plate, then he looked down again.

Abe stood there, shifting his feet a little in embarrassment. He said at last, "You go ahead an' eat."

With his mouth full, Dillon said, "Sure."

Sitting there, his hat still wedged on his head, the knife and fork dwarfed in his big hairy hands, Dillon impressed Abe. There was an intense, savage power coming from him; Abe could feel it. It scared him a little.

For something to say, Abe remarked, "You come far?"

Again Dillon raised his cold eyes and looked. "Far enough," he said.

Abe pulled up a chair and carefully lowered his small body down. He put his hands on the table—clean, soft hands of a child. He said, "Where you headin' for?"

Dillon tore a piece of bread from the loaf and swabbed his plate round, then he put the bread in his mouth and clamped on it slowly. He pushed his plate away from him and sat back, hooking his thumbs in his belt. He still kept his head slightly lowered, so Abe couldn't see him very well. "As far as I can git," he said.

"Maybe a drop of beer'd come nice?" Abe said.

Dillon shook his head. "I can't use the stuff."

In spite of himself, Abe's face brightened. The guy could have a drink on him with pleasure, but, maybe, he was getting a little generous. He said, "A smoke?"

Again Dillon shook his head. "Can't use that either."

Outside, in the store, Rosey gave a sudden squeal. Abe sat up listening. "What's up with my Rose?" he said.

Dillon explored his teeth with a match end. He said nothing. Abe got to his feet and walked into the store.

Walcott was leaning over the counter, glaring at Rosey. His thin, boney face was red.

Abe said nervously, "What is it?"

Walcott shouted, "What's up? I'll tell you what's up, you goddam Kike. She ain't givin' me no more tick, that's what's up."

Abe nodded his head. "That's right, Mister Walcott," he said, going a little white. "You owe me too much."

Walcott saw he was scared. He said, "You gimme what I want, or I'll bust you." He closed his hand into a fist and leant over the counter, swinging at Abe. Abe stepped back hastily and banged his head hard against a shelf. Rosey squealed again.

Dillon shuffled slowly out of the kitchen into the store. He looked at Walcott, then he said, "Lay off."

Walcott was drunk. The corn whisky still burnt in a fiery ball deep inside him. He turned slowly. "Keep out of this, you bum," he said.

Dillon reached forward and hit Walcott in the middle of his face. The blow came up from his ankles. A spongy mass of blood suddenly appeared where Walcott's nose had been. Walcott reeled away, holding on to his face with both hands.

Dillon stood watching him. He rubbed his knuckles with his other hand. He said, "Scram . . . get the hell outta here!"

Walcott went, his knees buckling as he walked.

Abe and Rosey stood motionless. The little Jew's hands Muttered up and down his coat. He finally said, "You shouldn't've hit him that hand."

Dillon said nothing. He began to move to the door.

Abe said, "Wait. Don't go. I guess we gotta thank you for that."

Dillon turned his head. "Save it," he said, "I got to get goin'."

Rosey plucked at Abe's sleeve. "Give that boy a job, Goldberg," she said.

Abe looked at her in astonishment. "Why, Rosey . . ." he began.

Dillon looked at them suspiciously. Standing there in the dim store, his great shoulders hunched, he frightened Abe.

Rosey said, "Go on, Goldberg, give him a break. You gotta get a hand some time, so make it now."

Abe looked timidly at Dillon. "Sure," he said uneasily. "That's dead right. I was goin' to hire me a hand. That's right. Suppose we talk it over?"

Dillon stood hesitating, then he nodded.

"Sure, go ahead an' talk about it."

Myra Hogan walked down the main street, conscious of the turning heads. Even the niggers hesitated in their work, frightened to look up, but peeping their heads lowered.

She clicked on, her high wooden heels tapping a challenge. The men watched her, stripping her with their eyes, as she passed them.

The women watched her, too. Cold, envious eyes, hating her. Myra rolled her hips a little. She put on a slight strut, patting her dark curls. Her firm young body, unhampered by any restraining garment, moved rhythmically. Her full, firm breasts jerked under the thin covering of her cheap, flowered dress.

At the end of the street a group of slatternly women stood gossiping, ripping people to pieces in the hot sunlight. They saw her coming and stopped talking, standing there; silent, elderly, bulging women, worn out by childbirth and hard work. Myra stiffened as she approached them. For a moment her step lost its rhythmic swing. The wooden heels trod softer. Her confidence in herself had no solid foundations; she was still very young. In the company of her elders she had to force herself forward.

With an uneasy smile on her full red lips she came on. But the women, as she came nearer, shifted like a brood of vultures, turning their drooping shoulders against her, their eyes sightless, not seeing her. Again the wooden heels began to click Her face flushed, her head held high, she went past.

A buzz of talk broke out behind her. One of the women said loudly: "I'd give her something—the dirty little whore."

Myra kept on. "The sluts!" she thought, furious with them. "I've got everything, and they hate me."

The bank stood at the end of the main street. Clem Gibson was standing in the doorway. He saw Myra coming, and he nervously fingered his tie.

Clem Gibson was someone in the town. He ran the bank, he owned a car, and he changed his shirt twice a week.

Myra slowed down a little and flashed him a smile.

"Why, Miss Hogan, you are lookin' swell," Gibson said.

This line of talk pleased Myra. She said, "Aw, you're kiddin'."

Gibson beamed behind his horn glasses. "I wouldn't kid you, Miss Hogan, honest."

Myra made to move on. "Well, it's nice of you to say so," she said. "I've just got to get goin'. My Pa's waitin' for me."

Gibson came down the two steps. "I was going to suggest—that is—I wanted to ask you . . . He paused, embarrassed.

Myra looked up at him, her long black lashes curling above her eyes. "Yes?"

"Look, Miss Hogan, suppose you an' me go places sometime."

Myra shook her head. She thought he'd got a hell of a nerve. Go out with him and have his horse-faced wife starting a beef. He was crazy. Myra had enough sense to leave the married men alone. They were only after one thing, and she wasn't giving anything away. "Pa just wouldn't stand for it," she said. "He don't like married men takin' me out. Ain't he soft?"

Gibson stepped back. His face glistened with embarrassment. "Sure,"

he said, "your Pa's right. You better not tell him about this. I wasn't thinking." He was scared of Butch Hogan.

Myra moved on. "I won't tell him," she said.

He watched her hungrily as she went, her buttocks jerking under the tight dress.

It was quite a walk to her home, and she was glad when she pushed open the low wooden gate that led to the tumbledown shack.

She stood at the gate and looked at the place. She thought, "I hate it! I hate it! I hate it!"

The garden was a patch of baked, cracked mud. The house was a one-storeyed affair, made throughout with wood that wind and rain had warped and sun had bleached. It stood there—an ugly depressing symbol of poverty.

She walked up the path and climbed the two high steps leading to the verandah. In the shadow, away from the sun, Butch Hogan sat, his great hands resting on the top of a heavy stick.

He said, "I've been waiting for you."

She stood there and looked at him. His broken, tortured face, those two horrible eyes, sightless, with a yellow blob in each pupil, looking like two clots of phlegm, the great square head, the overhanging brows, and the ferocious mouth made her shiver. He startled her by suddenly regurgitating violently into the mud patch a sodden wad of chewing tobacco.

He said, "Say somethin', can't you? Where in hell've you been?"

She put the bottle of whisky on the table beside him. "There it is," she said and she put beside it the rest of the money.

With fumbling fingers he checked the money, before slipping it into his pocket. Then he stood up and stretched. Although he was tall, his great shoulders gave him a squat look. He turned his face in her direction. "Go on in I wantta talk with you."

She went into the living room, leading off the verandah. It was a large room, untidy and full of aged and decaying furniture. Hogan followed her in. He moved with quick, cat-like steps, avoiding in some extraordinary way any obstacles that lay in his path. Blindness had

not anchored him. He had been like that for ten years. At first the darkness had suffocated him, but he had fought it, and, like all his other fights, he had beaten it. Now it was of little hindrance to him. He could do most things he wanted to. His hearing had intensified and served him for his eyes.

Myra stood sulkily by the table. She made patterns with her flimsy shoes on the dusty floor.

Hogan went to a cupboard, found a glass, and poured himself out a stiff shot of whisky. Then he went over to the one overstuffed chair and folded himself down in it. He took a long pull from the glass.

“What's your age now?” he asked abruptly. The two yellow clots fixed on her.

“Seventeen.”

“Come here,” Hogan said, reaching out a great thick arm. She didn't move.

“If I come an' get you, you're goin' to have grief.”

She moved over to him reluctantly, and stood just by his knees. “What is it?” she asked, her face a little scared.

His hand closed on her arm, the big thick fingers pinching her muscle, making her squirm.

“Stand still,” he said. With his free hand he began exploring her body. Letting his hand run over her, like some farmer poking and examining a plump bird. Then he let her go, and sat back with a grunt. “You're growing up,” he said.

Myra stepped back, a little flush of anger on her face. “You keep your paws off me,” she said.

Butch pulled at the coarse hairs growing out of his ears. “Siddown,” he said, “I'm goin' to talk to you.”

“Supper ain't ready,” she said; “I ain't got time to listen to you.”

He left his chair with incredible speed, and before she could dart away from him he struck her shoulder with the flat of his hand. He was aiming at her head, but he misjudged. She went over on hands and knees and stayed there, dazed. He knelt down beside her. “You're

getting big ideas, ain't you?" he snarled at her. "You think I can't hold you, but I can. Do you get that? Maybe I've lost my peepers, but that ain't goin' to mean a thing to you. So get wise to yourself, will you?"

She sat up slowly, nervously feeling her shoulder. A smack from Butch meant something.

"I gotta hunch you're goin' to take after your Ma. I've had my eye on you for some time. I hear what's been said. You're after the punks already. Like your Ma. That dirty little whore had the ants okay. You're showing yourself off, an' you're working up a hot spot for yourself. Well, I'm watchin' you, see? I'm goin' to crack down on you, once I catch you at it. You leave punks alone, and make 'em leave you alone."

She said uneasily, "You're nuts! I don't go around with fellas."

Butch sneered. "I'm tellin' you before you start. You're ripe. You're ready to go ahead. Well, start somethin' an' see what you get."

She climbed to her feet. "You gotta catch me at it," she thought.

"Okay, go an' get somethin' to eat. You get the idea now, huh?"

She turned to the door, but he reached out and jerked her back. "You get it?" "Oh, sure!" she said impatiently.

Butch tapped the broad belt round his waist. "If ever I catch you in a tumble, I'm goin' to lift the hide off your back."

She snatched her arm away and walked out of the room, her knees trembling a little.

Outside, a ramshackle car drew up, and three men got out. Myra sped to the door, looked out, then ran to her bedroom. Her eyes were bright with excitement, and a little smile flickered on her lips. Gurney was coming in, with his ham boxer. Gurney made Myra's heart flutter. He was some guy, this Gurney.

Sankey the boxer walked up the broken path, his head on his chest, his big hands hanging loosely by his side. Hank, his trainer, watched him anxiously. He caught Gurney's eye, and jerked his head. He looked worried. Gurney was looking for Myra. Sankey gave him a pain.

The three of them paused on the verandah. Butch came out of the

room. He said, "You ain't been around here for some time. How're you makin' out?"

Gurney made signs to the other two Sankey took no notice, but Hank nodded briefly.

Butch was glad to have them. He said, "Sit down, for Pete's sake. How's your boy shapin'?"

Under cover of the noise made by the other two dragging their chairs up, Gurney slipped into the house. He knew Myra's room. He opened the door and put his head round. Myra was painting her lips. She had put on a pair of white step-ins. She jerked round, seeing his face in the fly-blown mirror.

"You get out!" she said.

Gurney found his mouth suddenly dry. He stepped in and shut the door, putting his back against the panels. Gurney was big. He had a bent nose and a big slit of a mouth. His eyes were always a little shifty. He dressed in a loud, flashy way, wearing black suits with a yellow or pink stripe. His shirts were mostly red or yellow cotton. He thought he was a swell dresser.

Myra, suddenly anxious, said, "Nick . . . blow the old man won't stand for it . . . please."

Gurney came round the bed and reached out for her. She skipped away, her eyes suddenly large and scared. "If you don't get out, I'll yell," she said.

"Aw, honey, that ain't the way to talk . . . Gurney was crowding her the whole time. "You're lookin' swell. I ain't goin' to start anythin', honest." His hand touched her arm, and she suddenly felt weak. She said feebly, "Don't, Nick, the old man'll kill me—"

Gurney said, "Don't worry about him." He pulled her into his arms, his hands burning on her cool flesh.

White-hot desire for him stabbed her, gripping her inside with iron fingers. She searched for his mouth with hers, gripping him round the neck, half strangling him. Gurney grinned to himself. He said to her, "I'm comin' out to see you one night soon. You're goin' to like that, ain't that right?"

Outside on the verandah, Butch punched and pummeled Sankey.

Sankey stood there, with his head on his chest, like a horse on the way to the knacker's.

Butch said, "He's all right, ain't he?" He said it anxiously, looking in Hank's direction.

Hank said, "Sure." But it wasn't impressive.

"I'm goin' to need a lot of luck with Franks," Sankey mumbled.

Butch stiffened. "For God's sake, that guy ain't no use. He can't hit you."

Sankey shifted. "I wish to hell you're right."

"That punk couldn't hit you with a handful of gravel."

"He ain't got to hit me with gravel, has he?" Sankey turned to the rail and sat on it. He still kept his head down.

Butch rubbed both his hands over his bald head. "Listen, this is crazy talk. When you get in there, you're goin' to give this punk the works, see? You're going to left hand him till you've pushed his nut off his neck. Then over with your right, an' lay him among the sweet peas."

Sankey didn't say anything.

Butch was getting the jitters. "Where's Gurney? Ain't he here?" he asked suddenly.

"Sure," Hank said quickly. "He's fixin' the auto. She ain't so good as she was. He'll be along."

Butch said, "I want him now."

Hank went to the edge of the step and yelled, "Hi, Gurney! Butch wants you." He put a lot of beef in his voice.

Butch said suspiciously, "Why d'you yell like that?— he ain't deaf."

Hank began to sweat. He shouted again.

Gurney came round the side of the shack at a run. He'd got a lot of red smears on his face from Myra's paint. That didn't matter. Butch couldn't see them. He was quite cool when he came up the steps.

Butch said, "What the hell've you been doin'?"

Hank put in quickly, "I told you, he's been fixin' the bus."

Gurney grinned a little. "Yeah that's right. That auto's sure goin' home."

Butch said. "Where's Myra?"

Gurney was elaborately calm. The old sonofabitch was sharp, he thought. "Just what I was goin' to ask you. I gotta soft spot for that kid."

Butch chewed his underlip. He sat down in the chair, his great fists clenched. "You leave her alone," he growled.

Gurney grinned again but he made his voice smooth. "What's biting you, Butch? You know kids ain't my racket. When I have a woman, she's gotta be a tramp "

Butch said, "Okay, but leave Myra alone."

There was a little pause, then Hank said: "Will you be there, Butch?"

His mind brought back to Sankey, Butch began to look worried again. "Your boy ain't got no confidence," he said to Gurney.

Gurney lit a cigarette and tossed the match into the mud patch. "He's okay. He's just nervous. It don't amount to anythin'."

"Yeah?" Butch levered himself forward. "You crazy? That guy's carrying my dough. That guy's gotta win."

Sankey shifted. "Forget it," he said. "Can't you gab about somethin' else?"

Butch turned his head. "Take him away," he said to Hank. "Lead him round the place. I wantta talk to Gurney."

Hank got up and jerked his head. "Come on," he said to Sankey. They went down the path and sat in the car.

Butch leant forward. "What the hell's this?" he snarled. "That palooka's out on his feet already."

Gurney scratched his chin. "What the hell can I do about it? Franks has scared him, got him jittery. They ran into each other at the boozier the other night. You know Franks, he got on Sankey's nerves."

Butch got to his feet. He raised his clenched fists above his head. "The yellow punk," he said, his voice suppressed and strangled. "You gotta do somethin', Gurney. I've got too much dough on that bum to risk. I tell you, you gotta do somethin'."

"I've got a hundred bucks on him myself," Gurney said uneasily. "He's a trifle overtrained, I guess."

"You've got a week to fix things," Butch said slowly. "Use your head."

Myra came out on the verandah. Her eyes were fixed on Gurney. Butch jerked his head round. "Where've you been?" he demanded.

"Your supper's ready," she said.

Gurney got to his feet. "Okay, Butch, I'll see what I can do."

Very softly he walked across to Myra and kissed her. Kissed her right under Butch's nose. Myra didn't dare stop him, but she went so white that he held her arm for a second.

"What you doin'?" Butch asked. He stood there, his head on one side, straining his ears.

"I'm on my way," Gurney grinned. "Bye, Myra; take care of your Pa."

He went away, grinning.

Myra slipped into the kitchen. Her heart was thumping hard against her ribs. The crazy loon, she thought, to do a thing like that. She stood quite still, in the middle of the untidy kitchen, holding her breasts tightly, her eyes half closed, thinking of him.

* * *

The town took an interest in Dillon. Abe noticed that trade picked up when Dillon was in the store. The women came in to look at him. They had heard about Walcott. A guy who could hit like that must have plenty of steam. Any guy with steam made the women in Plattsville a little lightheaded.

They got a shock when they saw Dillon, but they wouldn't admit they were disappointed. They had hoped to see a Clark Gable, and Dillon's

clay-like face and cold expressionless eyes startled them. They told one another that he was a bad man, and they kept on coming in to have another look at him.

The men in Plattsville got sour about it. They said anyone could have smacked Walcott down; he was a cheap punk and didn't amount to anything.

They were talking about Dillon in the saloon when Gurney came in. They broke off. Gurney stopped most talk wherever he went. They wanted to know how Sankey was shaping.

Freedman pushed his way forward. "H'yah, Nick," he said, "what you havin'?"

Gurney was used to this sort of thing. He couldn't place Freedman, but that didn't worry him. He said, "Rye, straight."

George lumbered along the counter with the bottle and glass. He left it at Gurney's elbow.

Freedman said, "Your boy okay?"

Gurney poured himself out a shot and tossed it down his throat. He said, "Sure, he's all right."

"I got my money on him," Freedman said. "I'd like to see him win."

"He's goin' to win, you see."

Wilson lounged to the bar. "Franks ain't so bad," he said; "I guess I fancy Franks."

Gurney looked him over. Just a small town wiseguy he thought, maybe not so small town. He said, "Hell, someone's got to back him."

The others laughed.

Wilson's face reddened angrily. "Yeah?" he said. "Sankey's gettin' nerves. That guy's goin' to be stiff before he gets in there. Franks'll beat hell out of him."

Gurney turned to fill his glass. He thought this line of talk wouldn't get him anywhere. He tapped Wilson on his coat front. "Get wise, sucker," he said. "Ain't you heard of a front? Sankey's full of tricks. This is one of 'em. Listen, Sankey could whip Franks blindfolded. He's springing a surprise for that palooka. Get your dough on the right

man."

Wilson began to lose confidence. "That straight?" he asked; "that on the level?"

Gurney winked at Freedman. "He asks me it it's straight? Me! Take him away someone an' bury him."

Freedman said, "I'd like your boy to push this Dillon around. That's what that bastard wants."

Gurney raised his eyebrows. "Dillon? Who's he?"

They jostled one another to tell him. Gurney stood, his shoulders against the wall, a glass in his hand, and listened. He said at last, "Abe ain't no fool This guy can't be so bad."

Freedman said, "He's got Goldberg tooled."

Gurney was getting sick of Freedman. He straightened his coat, leant forward over the counter, and adjusted his hat in the wall mirror. "I gotta see Abe; I'll look this guy over."

Freedman made as if to go with him. Gurney checked him with a look. "This is a little matter of business," he said.

Freedman said, "Sure, you go ahead." He said it hastily. He didn't want to get in bad with Gurney.

Crossing the street, Gurney entered the store. It was the slack part of the day, and the place was empty. Dillon came out from the back, and stood with his hands resting on the counter, framed by two towers of tinned foods. He was wearing one of Abe's store suits that fitted him in places, and his face was close-shaven. He didn't look the hobo that had come into Plattsville a few days back. He looked at Gurney from under his eyelids. A cold, suspicious stare. Gurney thought he might be a mean sort of a guy.

"Abe about?" he asked.

Dillon shook his head. "He's out," he said briefly.

"Too bad. I wanted to see Abe." Gurney fidgeted a little. Dillon made him a little uneasy.

"Will he be long?" he said after a pause.

“Maybe.” Dillon began to edge away into the darkness of the store.

Gurney thought he'd try a little probing. He said: “You're new around here.”

Dillon rubbed his forearm. He still looked at Gurney from under his eyelids. “You're the guy who's runnin' Sankey, ain't you?” he said.

Gurney swelled a little. “That's me,” he said.

“What's the matter with him?”

“Matter? Nothin'. What d'you mean?”

“You know. That guy's gone yellow. What's eatin' him?”

Gurney paused, uncertain. Then he said, “Listen, I don't like that line of talk.”

Dillon wandered out from behind the counter, he still rubbed his forearm. “Don't 'big shot' me,” he said. “I said what's the matter with him?”

Again Gurney felt uneasy. The dangerous, savage power in Dillon conveyed itself to him.

“Franks got him jittery,” he said reluctantly.

Dillon nodded. “He goin' to win?”

“Sankey? I guess not.” Gurney frowned. “I gotta lotta dough on that boy.”

“I guess I could fix it,” Dillon said, watching him closely.

“You?” Gurney looked incredulous.

“Sure, why not?” Dillon lounged to the door and looked into the street, then he came back again.

“What d'you know about fixin' fights?” Gurney asked suspiciously.

“Plenty,” Dillon told him, then, after a pause, he added: “I'm lookin' for a chance to break into the dough again.”

Gurney was getting more than interested. “Suppose you come on out an' see Butch tonight? I'd like you to meet Butch Hogan.”

“Hogan?” Dillon thought a moment. “That the old ex-champ?”

“That's the guy. He lives just outside the town now. Blind he is—a tough break for a guy like that.”

“Yeah,” Dillon nodded his head, “a tough break.”

“Will you be along?”

“I guess so. Any other guys interested in Sankey?”

“There's Hank, he trains him, an' there's Al Morgan, who manages for him.”

“Tell 'em both to come. Not Sankey; he'd better keep out of it.”

Gurney said, “I'll take you along tonight.”

Dillon shook his head. “I'll be there,” he said; “you don't got to worry about me.”

He walked back behind the counter, leaving Gurney standing uncertain in the middle of the store. Then Gurney walked out into the bright sunlight. This guy Dillon got him beat. There was somethin' phoney about him. He was no hobo, he could tell that. This guy was used to handling men. He said a thing and expected the thing done. He scared Gurney a little.

He was so busy thinking about Dillon that he didn't see Myra walking down the street. Myra hastened her steps, but Gurney was already climbing into the car, and before she could call to him he had driven away.

Myra was quite pleased he hadn't seen her. She had taken some trouble in dressing. Her flowered dress had been washed and ironed. Maybe it had shrunk a shade, but that didn't worry her. She knew it showed off her figure. Her thick black hair glistened in the sunlight, and was dressed low in her neck. The seams of her imitation silk stockings were straight, and her shoes shone. She was going to have a look at Dillon.

She'd heard about Dillon the day he had moved in, but she had purposely waited until he had seen all the women in Plattsville. She thought it was time now to give him an eyeful. Walking down the street, she knew she was good. She knew the men turned their heads, and she guessed that she was going over big with this Dillon.

She walked into the empty store, clicking her heels sharply on the wooden floor. Purposely, she stood in the patch of sunlight flooding the doorway. She'd seen that trick worked before, and with her thin dress she knew she was showing plenty.

Dillon looked up. "I've seen it before," he said, "it ain't anythin' new. Come out of the light."

If he had struck her she couldn't have been more furious.

Automatically she moved a few paces into the shadow, then she said, "What kind of a cheap crack do you think that is?"

Dillon shitted a wad of gum from one side of his mouth to the other. "What do you want?" he said.

"A real live salesman, ain't you?" she said, gripping her purse hard. "If you want to keep your job you gotta do better than that."

Dillon said, "Skip it. I ain't listening to big mouth talk from a kid with hot pants. Get what you want and blow."

Myra took three quick steps forward and aimed a slap at Dillon's face. She was nearly sobbing with rage. Dillon reached up and caught her wrist. "Be your age," he said; "you ain't in the movies."

She stood there, helpless in his grip, loathing his hard eyes. "I'll tell my Pa about you," was all she could say.

He threw her arm away from him, spinning her into the centre of the store. "Scram, I tell you," he said.

She screamed at him: "You dirty sonofabitch! My Pa will bash you for this!"

Abe stood in the doorway, his eyes popping out of his head. "What's going on?" he asked.

Myra spun round. "You're crazy to have that bum in here. He's been insulting me—"

Dillon came round the counter with a quick shuffle. He took hold of Myra and ran her to the door, then he swung his arm and smacked her viciously across her buttocks, sending her skidding into the street. Myra didn't stop— she ran.

Abe tore his hair. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" he

squeaked. "That's Butch Hogan's daughter. The old man'll raise the dead about this."

Dillon came back into the store. "Forget it," he said. "I'm about sick of these goddam bitches starin' at me. Maybe they'll leave me alone for a while."

Abe, bursting with impotent fury, forgot his fear of Dillon. He spluttered, "An' what about my business? What are people goin' to say? They ain't comin' here to be roughed around. This is goin' to ruin me."

Dillon pushed him away and walked into the kitchen. Abe followed him, still shouting.

"Aw, forget it," Dillon snarled. "This ain't goin' to hurt your business. I bet that little chippy is as popular in this burg as a bad smell. This ain't goin' to get round the town. A kid like that ain't goin' to let on she's just had her fanny smacked . . . Forget it."

* * *

They all sat on Butch's verandah and waited for Dillon to come. The moon was just appearing above the black silhouetted trees, throwing sharp white beams on the windows of the house.

Upstairs, Myra crouched by the window, also waiting for Dillon. Her eyes, red with weeping, remained in a fixed stare on the road beneath her. Her whole being curled with hate. Her mind seethed.

Butch shifted a little in his chair. "Who the hell's this fella?" he asked suddenly, asking the same question that the others were pondering about in their minds.

"I don't know," Gurney said. "Maybe he can get us outta this jam. I thought it might be worth tryin'."

Hank said from the darkness: "Sankey's in a terrible state. He don't say anything, but just sits around an' broods. Franks's got him tied up."

Out of the darkness Dillon came up the verandah steps. Even Myra, who had been watching the road, hadn't heard him or seen him.

The four men sat still, looking at him. Then Gurney said, "This is Dillon."

Butch got to his feet. He moved round the small table, on which stood a bottle and glasses. He held out his hand. "So you're Dillon, the fight-fix?" There was a faint sneer in his voice.

Dillon looked him over, looked at his hand and ignored it.

Butch moved his great paw impatiently. "Gimme your hand," he said. "I wantta see what kind of a guy you are."

A gleam came into Dillon's eyes. He put his hand in Butch's. Then Butch squeezed. The tremendous muscles of his forearm swelled as he put all his strength into a crushing grip. The sweat suddenly jumped out of Dillon's face. He shifted his feet, then swung a punch at Butch with his left, coming up and hitting. Butch in his thick throat. It thumped into Butch like a cleaver into beef. Butch reeled back, making a croaking sound. Gurney sprang to his feet and saved him from going over.

Dillon stood flexing his ringers. "That's the kind of a guy I am," he said evenly.

Butch put his fingers to his throat. He sat down a little heavily. No one had hit him so hard since he left the resin. He said, when he got his breath, "This guy's okay, he can punch."

Dillon came a little nearer. "Suppose we get inside where I can see you."

They went inside without a word. Dillon stood by the window. He said, "Sit down."

Gurney said, "There's some booze outside, want any?"

Dillon looked at him. "I don't use it. Forget it! This is important. Franks has got your boy on the run. You're all backing Sankey for a win. Sankey ain't goin' to win unless Franks is so goddam bad that a child could push him around. That right?"

Gurney nodded. "I guess that's about it."

"Any of you guys got any dough?"

They looked at Morgan, a thin, cruel-faced little man who looked like

a jock. He said, "Maybe I could find some."

"I'll fix this fight for five hundred bucks," Dillon said. A little sigh went round the room. Gurney shook his head. "That's too much," he said.

Dillon rubbed the back of his neck. "You mugs dumb?" he said. "I said I'd fix this fight, and I mean fix it. Your man'll win You can back him for any money You can't lose."

Morgan leant forward. "I guess I'd like to know just who you are, mister," he said.

Dillon looked at him under his eyelids. "Maybe you'd like to know a lot of things . . . you ain't got to worry about me. I've done this sorta thing before What's it to be?"

Morgan looked at the other three. Butch nodded. "We'll come on in with you," he said.

Morgan shrugged. "Okay," he said. "I'll pay the money when Sankey's won."

Dillon showed his teeth. "You'll bet that five hundred bucks on Sankey for me. An' you'll lay the dough when I tell you."

Morgan thought a moment, then said, "Fair enough." The four men began to catch some of Dillon's confidence.

"Dig down," Dillon said, spreading a fin on the table. "I want some working expenses. This is all I got. Dig down."

Each contributed. Between the five of them they put up a hundred dollars. Dillon put the bills in his pocket. Gurney went out on to the verandah and fetched in the drinks. They all had a shot except Dillon.

Butch said, "How you goin' to handle this?"

Dillon tapped on the table with his fingernails. "I'm goin' to tell Franks to take a dive."

Butch said, "For God's sake, he'll knock your guts out."

Dillon shook his head. "He won't." He pushed back his chair. "I guess that's all." The others, except Butch, got to their feet. Dillon said, "Suppose you boys blow, I wantta talk to Butch."

Gurney moved to the verandah. "Maybe we'll get together some other time," he said.

"Yeah," Dillon nodded his head; "you might look round tomorrow."

Butch sat waiting until the others disappeared into the night. Dillon came back from the verandah. He stood looking at Butch thoughtfully. Then he closed the door and came over.

Butch said, "Who taught you to punch like that?"

Dillon shrugged. "Never mind that. I've got things to talk to you about. Anyone else in this dump?"

Hogan shook his head. "My gal's upstairs in bed. That's all."

"I'm goin' to make some dough out of the town," Dillon said. "You can come in on the ground floor if you want to."

Butch stroked his nose. "Suppose you put the cards down an' let me look at 'em," he said at last.

Dillon lowered his voice. "I carried a gun for Nelson," he said.

Crouched outside the door, Myra shivered a little.

Butch looked a little uneasy. "He was a hard guy," he said.

"He was a mug," Dillon said bitterly. "I've been under cover now some time. The heat's off. Okay, I guess it's time to move into the money again. How's it feel?"

Butch said, "You ain't tellin' me this unless you knew right off I'd agree."

Dillon nodded his head. "I thought you were a bright guy. Maybe you have lost your peepers, but you still got some brain."

Butch said again, "You want the house, huh? Near the State line. Me as a cover?"

"You got it." Dillon relaxed a little. "I ain't working anythin' this side of the border. Just quick raids. Nothin' very big; that'll come later. Then back under cover here. How do you like that?"

Butch brooded. "What's it worth?" he asked at last.

“Twenty-five per cent cut on everything.”

Butch nodded. “Okay.”

Dillon asked abruptly: “This guy Gurney—is he all right?”

Butch nodded. “He'd come in, I guess,” he said. “Gurney's after the big dough. He ain't particular how he makes it.”

“I'll have a word with him later. Now this guy Franks. There's only one way to deal with him. He's gotta have a scare thrown in him, see? He's got to be tipped off that he gets it if he doesn't take a dive. The first thing is to square the Town Marshal How'd you stand with him?”

“He's an old bird Sell his soul for a buck. He can be squared.”

“Then see him an' fix it. I gotta keep out of this. Tip him off to put his money on Sankey an' tell him the fight's rigged. If Franks puts up a squawk for protection, he won't get it, see?”

Butch nodded.

Dillon took out the hundred dollars and counted out fifty of them.”

“Give him that to bet with.”

Butch fumbled with the money and put it in his pocket. “I guess you're goin' to fix this fight all right,” he said. “I'm putting everything I've got on this.”

Dillon said, “It's goin' to be okay, you see.”

He moved over to the door. Outside, Myra crept away, not making a sound. She climbed the ladder leading to the loft which served for her bedroom; and safe in the darkness of familiar surroundings she slipped out of her dress before going to the window. Dillon was standing in the road, looking cautiously up and down, then with a quick shuffling step he disappeared into the darkness.

Myra stood by the window some time, thinking, her face, lit by the moonlight, the hot air of the night touching her skin. Even when she got into bed she could not sleep. The clay-like face of Dillon hung before her like the dead face of the moon. His voice still rang in her ears, scorning her. The blow that he had struck her still burnt her body, making her squirm on the sagging mattress. Sleep would not come to her, to blot out mercilessly the pain of her bruised pride. She suddenly began to cry the hot tears running down her face unchecked.

Her two fists, clenched, beat on the bed. "I hate you! I hate you!" she sobbed. "You lousy, goddam bastard!"

* * *

Gurney drove carefully. He had to nurse the car over the rough road. One good pothole would sure bust the axle. Dillon sat beside him, his hat over his eyes. Every now and then Gurney shot him a quick look. Dillon had him guessing. He couldn't place him. Something told him that Dillon would get him somewhere, that he would lead him to the money class, but, fascinated by the thought, he still hung back a little, not trusting him.

It was the evening following the meeting of Dillon and Butch. Dillon had picked Gurney up after the store had closed for the night. They were on their way across the border to the hick town where Franks lived. They were going to call on Franks.

Dillon said suddenly: "You gotta tackle this guy; I'll just be around. You know what to say. Don't let him start anythin'. Talk tough. He won't take a sock at you. I'll be right with you."

Gurney brooded, staring at the road, white and dusty in the headlights. "This guy can hit," he said uneasily. "He'll get mad if I shoot off too much."

Dillon shifted. "You do what I say," he said, "I can handle any mad guy." He pulled a heavy Colt automatic from the inside of his coat, turned it in his hand, so that Gurney could see it, then he put it back.

"For God's sake"—Gurney was startled—"where the hell did you get that?"

Dillon looked at him, peering at him from under his hat. "You ain't scared of a rod?" he asked.

This was too tough for Gurney, but he didn't say so. He licked his lips uneasily and drove on. After a while he said, "You ain't goin' to pop this guy?"

"Sure I'm goin' to, if he gets mad." Dillon said. "This ain't the first guy I've popped."

The old car swerved a little. Gurney found his hands trembling. "I guess I ain't standin' for a murder rap," he said suddenly.

Dillon reached out and turned off the switch. The engine sputtered and went dead. Gurney trod on the brake. "What's the idea?" he asked nervously.

Dillon pushed back his hat and leant towards Gurney, crowding him into the corner of the car. "Listen," he said, "you're goin' to get this straight. From now on I'm givin' the orders and you're takin' 'em, see? We're gettin' into the dough, an' no one's stoppin' us. If they get in our way it's goin' to be so much grief for 'em—get that? In a little while I'll be running the town. You can get in in the ground floor or you can stay out. You stay out an' one dark night someone's goin' to toss a handful of slugs in your guts; you know too much—get all that? Butch's on, so get wise to yourself."

Gurney went a little yellow. He didn't have to think much. "Sure," he said, "I get it. Sure, you go ahead. You're the boss."

Dillon raked him with his cold eyes. "There was one bright boy who talked like that an' changed his mind. He walked down a street one night with his guts hanging out down to his knees. Someone gutted him with a knife. Hell! You ought to have seen that guy. He tried to stuff his guts back, but just touching them with his hands made him so sick he let 'em hang in the end."

Gurney said, "You ain't goin' to have any trouble with me." He said it in a weak voice, but he meant it.

They drove on.

A clock somewhere struck the half-hour after ten when they pulled up outside Franks' house. It wasn't much to look at from the front, but then Franks was only a smalltime fighter, just making his way. They walked up the short path and stood outside the screen door. Gurney pulled at the bell, hearing it jangle somewhere at the back. Behind a yellow blind a light gleamed. Someone was up all right.

Through the screen door they could see a woman coming. Dillon nodded to Gurney and stepped back a little.

The door opened outwards, and the woman stood on the step looking at them with a little puzzled frown. She was young and plain. Her black hair was done up in a coil, a few ends straggling untidily. She had a good figure, her breasts riding high, and large hips. When she

spoke, her voice was soft and carried a southern accent. "What is it, please?" she said.

"Len in?" Gurney said.

The woman nodded. "Sure he's in," she said. "Who shall I say?"

Gurney took a step forward, pushing the woman back. Followed by Dillon, he walked into the house. The woman retreated, her face suddenly frightened. "What is it?" she asked breathlessly. "You can't come busting in like this."

Gurney walked into the sitting room. Franks was sitting in an easy chair holding a child awkwardly, a bottle of milk suspended in his hand. Franks was a big, smoothfaced guy, young and free from the usual mashed features of a fighter.

The woman brushed past Gurney and ran over to Franks. She was badly scared. Franks pushed the baby into her arms, getting to his feet quickly. He was startled. His eyes showed it; they were a little wide, but he wasn't losing his head. If there was going to be trouble, his confidence in his great flat muscles was unshakable.

"You can't come in here like this," he said to Gurney. "I see guys like you at the gym."

Gurney grinned uneasily. He was a little nervous of Franks. "We're in, buddy," he said. "Get the dame outta here, we want to talk to you."

Franks said, "Beth, take the kid."

She went out without a word. She was only gone a second or so. She came back alone, and stood just behind Franks. Her eyes were big and scared. Franks said to her patiently, "Keep out of this, honey."

She didn't say anything, but she didn't move. Dillon's thin lips set in a sneer.

Franks was calming down. He said, "You sure startled me," there was a foolish little smile on his big, rubbery lips, "bustin' in like that. You're crazy I might've pushed you boys around."

Gurney said, "Don't talk big, Franks, you're in a spot."

Franks' eyes opened. He knotted his muscles. Gurney could see them swelling under his coat. "Not from you I ain't," he said. "What is it?"

Gurney pulled a chair round and sat down. He was careful to put the table between them. Dillon leant against the door. Beth watched him the whole time. She was dead scared of Dillon.

“We're tippin' you off,” Gurney said evenly, “Sankey's gotta win this brawl.”

“Yeah?” Franks' breath whistled through his nose. “He'll win okay if he ain't flattened before the last round.”

“You don't get it,” Gurney said patiently; “you're throwin' the fight.”

Franks stood very still. “Like hell I don't get it,” he said. “Who said?”

Dillon said quietly from the door, “I said so.”

Franks turned his head; he looked at Dillon slowly up and down.

“Who're you?” he said. “You're nuts. You two'd better get outta here before I toss you out.”

There was a pause, then Dillon said, “You're goin' to run into a lotta grief if you don't take a dive.”

Franks went a little pale. “Okay, you two rats; here it comes.” He jerked aside the table. Gurney scrambled to his feet, his face white. Beth gave a sudden short scream as the big Colt sprang into Dillon's hand. Franks saw it. It stopped him just like he had banged his face against a brick wall. “Hey!” he said.

“That's it,” Dillon said viciously. “Don't start anything; you'll have a second navel if you do.”

Beth put her hand on Franks' arm. “Don't let him shoot you, Harry! . . . Don't let him shoot you!”

Dillon crouched a little by the door. His face was drawn, his lips just off his teeth. “I'll give it to you, sucker,” he said; “just one move outta you an' you get it.”

Franks was scared of the gun. He'd never run into a gunman before. It unsettled him. “Are you bugs?” he said, keeping his voice steady. “You can't do this.”

“Forget it,” Dillon said savagely; “you listen. You're takin' orders, an' you're likin' 'em. You're throwin' that fight, see? Sankey's gotta win in about the fifth. You can fix it how you like, but he's gotta win We got

too much dough on that boy to fool around makin' mistakes."

Beth began to cry. She made a little shuddering, jarring sound that got on Gurney's nerves.

Dillon went on talking. "When you get in there, you put up a good show, but no heavy work; just rough around, see? Then let Sankey haul off an' sock you. Just one, make it look a lucky punch. Right, you go down, an' you stay down. Now listen, you goddam punk, you double-cross me' an see what you get. I'll get this dame first, an' I'll get the little 'un as well. Then I lay for you. This ain't a bluff—you see."

For a moment Gurney thought Franks was going to rush Dillon, and he braced himself. Franks could see that he'd get nowhere doing that. Dillon could have fired three or four times before he caught up with him. So he just stood there, his head lowered, his eyes gleaming, and his great hands working at his sides. He said at last, "Sankey'll win okay." His voice came out of his throat in a strangled croak. Beth slipped to her knees, holding his hand. They stood like that for a long time, with Dillon staring at them. Then Dillon jerked his head at Gurney, and together they backed out into the night.

* * *

Gurney sat in the car, smoking. He had left Dillon at Abe's store and had driven out of town. The night was still and very close. Big black clouds, looking like lumps of coal, hung sluggishly in the sky. The moon rode low, just skirting the black treetops.

His mind excited, Gurney sat smoking hard. The red tip of his cigarette glowed in the smothering darkness of the car. His brain was crawling with thoughts. It was the gun that excited him. He could see Franks' face now. He could see how that gun stopped his rush, turned him from toughness to dough. Any guy could give orders with a rod in his hand. It was the rod that did it. Gurney shifted in his seat. Dillon was a hard guy, but without a gun Franks would have squashed him—made a smear of him on the wall. That showed you how powerful a gun was.

A big, silent car flashed past. Gurney saw the dame sitting in front with a well-dressed guy, looking as if he owned the earth. The dame was glittering in a white dress, that sparkled. She looked a honey all

right.

With a gun, Gurney thought, I'd have the last word with that lousy punk. A gun would level things up mighty quick. Thinking about the dame, his mind went on to Myra. If there was ever a broad asking for it, there she was. What the hell was he waiting for, anyway? He leant forward and turned the switch.

It did not take him long to run out to Butch's place. He stopped the jaloopy a few hundred yards from the shack under a clump of trees, and turned off the lights. It was off the road, and it would be safe there. He got out, and walking on the grass border of the road approached silently.

One solitary light was burning in the downstairs room. Silently, moving his feet with care, he walked towards the window. He had a great respect for Butch's ears. He put his fingers on the windowledge and pulled himself up.

Myra was standing quite close to him, pressing a dress with a flat-iron. She was alone.

Gurney lowered himself to the ground and walked round the front. He rapped on the screen with his knuckles. He waited a minute, feeling his heart beating jerkily against his ribs. Then Myra's silhouette blotted out the screen and she said, "Who is it?"

"Hyah, baby," Gurney said, speaking very low; "you alone?"

She pushed open the screen and came out on the step. "Nick!" There was a little catch in her voice. It didn't get by Gurney. He grinned in the darkness.

"Sure," he said. "Butch in?"

She shook her head. "He went down to the gym. He won't be so long, though."

"Lemme in, baby, I gotta talk to you."

"No—no, it's late, Nick. You can't come in now."

Gurney reached out his hands, taking her arms just above her elbows. "Get goin'," he said gently; "you don't want to be seen yappin' out here."

At his touch her resistance sagged. She let him push her back into the house. She broke away from him when they entered the room, standing with her back against the wall, her eyes fixed on him.

“You gotta be careful,” she said. “He’s coming back. You know him. He’ll be right in on us; he comes so quietly. Not now, Nick, I’m scared he’ll come . . . Nick, please . . .”

Gurney, his hat still at the back of his head, pulled her away from the wall. She struggled to get away from him until his mouth reached hers, then she clung to him, beating his shoulder blades with the flat of her hands.

Down the road Butch came, his great body throwing a bloated shadow that stumbled and lurched just ahead of him. He made no sound, walking in the grass. He kept his ear cocked for motors. Butch had got to watch out for himself. Skirting the bend, he hastened his steps; he knew that he was nearly home. Walking, his head bent, he was puzzling about Dillon. Sankey also worried him. He’d got a lot of dough on Sankey. If Dillon didn’t get that brawl rigged he was going to be down a lot—a hell of a lot too much.

He silently padded up the mud path, pausing on the top step of the verandah to have a last smell of the night air. He didn’t like it. It came hot and close to him. He thought maybe a storm would get up.

Myra slid from the settee to the floor when Butch walked in. Gurney sat up, his face going a little green with his fright. Butch would break his back if he caught him in here.

Myra hadn’t any clothes on, except her shoes and stockings. She stood quite close to Gurney, her face set, and the first shock ebbing away. She said, “I was just going to bed.” Her voice was steady.

Butch remained by the door. Something told him that things weren’t right. “It’s late,” he said, listening with his head on one side.

Myra motioned Gurney to stay where he was. Gurney was sitting propped up on his elbow, one leg on the floor. Sweat ran down his face, making him look ghastly in the bright naked light.

Butch moved forward a little, shutting the door.

“Sankey all right?” Myra asked.

“Yeah,” Butch said; he passed his hand over the top of his bald head.

His eyes looked straight at Gurney. The two yellow clots bore into Gurney's brain. "Seems quiet here," Butch went on.

Myra stooped and picked up her dress. Butch heard the rustle of the material as she gathered it into a ring to slip over her head. "What you doin'?" he said sharply.

Myra shook a little, the dress slipping out of her hands. "I told you I'm going to bed." She began to walk heavily about the room, taking up the ironing board and putting it against the wall. "Sankey going to win?" she asked, for something to say.

"You're interested in that guy, ain't you?"

Gurney's muscles began to ache, sitting like that. He was too scared to move. He just stayed there, his eyes fixed on Butch.

"Why not?" Myra's knees were beginning to shake. The old geezer guessed there was something wrong, she thought. She walked carelessly over to the couch again and picked up her dress. Neither Gurney nor she looked at each other.

Butch moved quickly. He almost trod on Gurney's foot as he went by. He snatched Myra's dress out of her hands. Myra skipped away and flattened herself against the wall. Her eyes sprang open wide.

Butch felt the dress in his hands, then he put it to his nose. His big, rubbery face darkened. "What the hell you doin'?" he growled. "Why've you taken this off?"

Steeling her voice, she said, "What's the matter with you tonight? I was hot . . . can't a girl take her dress off?"

"Come here."

Gurney stopped breathing.

Myra said, pressing herself against the wall, "Not damn likely!"

Butch walked slowly to the door and locked it. He took the key out and put it in his pocket. "There's something phoney goin' on here," he snarled at her. "Let's see what it is."

Gurney thought, "With a gun I could blast the old devil."

With a sliding shuffle Butch came at Myra. He came so quickly that she only just escaped him. Slithering along the wall, out of his reach,

she stood by the door breathing in short, jerky gasps.

Butch stood, his hand on the wall, his sightless eyes turned on her. "You'd better come here," he said.

Myra said in a small voice, "You're scaring me. Open the door, I tell you, I want to go to bed."

Butch caught her this time. Gurney didn't think it possible for him to move so quickly. His great hand caught her arm as she fled from him. He jerked her to him. His hot breath fanned her face.

She said, "Let me go! . . . Let me go! . . . Let me go!" Her voice went up a tone, mounting to a scream.

Gurney swung himself to the floor and stood up. Swiftly, Butch jerked his head round. "What's that?" he said harshly. He shook Myra. "What was that? There's someone else here . . . Who is it?"

"You're crazy," she gasped. "There's no one here."

His hand, swinging down, slapped her. Then he stiffened. Holding both her wrists in a crushing grip, he touched her quivering body.

Gurney was creeping inch by inch towards the open window. Myra, seeing him, began to scream, covering any sound that he made.,

Butch reached up; his hand, closing on her throat, nipped her screams short. Gurney swung himself forward, falling head first out of the window, his feet jerking the curtains from the rod. Picking himself up, he began to run drunkenly down the road, swaying from side to side.

Butch said, "So that's it, is it, you little whore?"

Myra felt her knees buckle. If Butch weren't holding her she would have slipped to the floor.

"Who was it?" He shook her. His great arms flung her this way and that, banging her legs against the wall. "Do you hear, who was the sonofabitch?"

"You'll . . . never make . . . me tell," she gasped, trying to tear her hands away.

"Yeah? Just wait an' see."

He dragged her across the room, until his legs struck the settee, then

he flung her down on it. She lay there, her eyes wide with terror. He kept a grip on her arm, muttering to himself and fumbling at the buckle of the broad belt at his waist. As he pulled it off, she twisted and turned over on her face, her arms protecting her head, screaming deep in her throat.

The belt curled through the air and hit her arched body. Myra screamed, "I'll kill you for this!"

It was only when his hand was slippery with sweat that she escaped him. She rolled off the settee, her arm sliding from his grip. They stood there, facing each other. Butch, his rubbery face hideous with cruel rage; Myra, her body streaked with red weals, murderous in her fury. Her hands closed on the back of a chair and, swinging it high, she hit Butch across the head with it.

Butch half guessed what she was doing, and he swerved, but she had anticipated the move. The chair crashed on his bald head, shattering itself. The legs of the chair flew across the room. Butch fell on his knees, roaring, as his brain reeled. She came at him again, battering down his upraised arms, beating him again and again with the thick chairback. He tried to save himself, his defence becoming more and more feeble, until he reeled over and fell on his side, like a stricken elephant. She drew off. Swinging the chairback over her head, she gave him one final crushing blow that made his battered head jerk up and then flop on the floor. Then, with a frightened look, she snatched up her dress and ran blindly up to her attic.

* * *

They pushed their way down the aisle. Gurney came first, then Dillon, and then Morgan. The house was so full they had difficulty in getting to their seats. They were right on top of the ring.

A preliminary was just commencing. The arc lights overhead dimmed as they arrived at their seats. Gurney squeezed past a slim blonde, pulling her skirts to her knees. "Don't mind me," she snapped.

Dillon stood waiting to pass. "If your arches ain't broke," he said, "suppose you stand up; I ain't so likely to strip you that way."

Two fat guys sitting behind her went off in loud, explosive sniggers.

The blonde took a look at Dillon and figured he was too tough for her. She stood up and let him through. Morgan crowded past her quickly. They sat down.

Just above the ring lights a heavy haze of tobacco smoke lay like a mist rising from damp ground. The hall was as hot as hell. Dillon wrenched his collar undone and pulled his tie down a little.

The two lightweights were slamming into each other murderously. Gurney leant towards Dillon. "You seen Sankey?" he asked.

Dillon shook his head. "Sankey ain't worryin' me," he said. "I guess I'll give Franks a call."

"We got him scared," Gurney said; "you see."

The crowd suddenly gave a great sigh, that sounded like a groan, as one of the fighters began to buckle at the knees.

Morgan shouted, "Go after him, you little punk—nail him."

The gong saved him.

Dillon got to his feet; he pushed past Morgan, climbed over the blonde and walked up the aisle again. At the head of the corridor leading to the dressing rooms a little runt in a yellow-white jersey stopped him. "This is as far as you'll get," he said.

"I'm on business," Dillon said, and went on.

The little runt had to let him go; he was just swept aside.

Dillon wandered into Sankey's room. Hank was sitting on a stool beside the table. Sankey was lying on the table, a bright red dressing gown covered him. They both looked up as Dillon came in.

Hank said, "He's on next but one."

Dillon pursed his lips. "You okay?" he said.

Sankey half sat up. "Sure I'm okay. This guy's goin' to take a dive, ain't he?"

Dillon nodded. "That don't mean you ain't gotta try," he said evenly; "you gotta watch this guy, Sankey."

Hank said heatedly, "Sure he'll watch him . . . what you think?"

Dillon nodded. Then he wandered out again. He walked softly down the corridor until he came to Franks' room. He put his hand inside his coat, feeling the cold butt of the Colt. Then he opened the door and went in.

Franks was staring moodily at his feet. His trainer, Borg, was sitting despondently on a wooden chair, cleaning his nails with a small knife. He looked up sharply as Dillon came in. "Wrong room, buddy," he said crisply. "On your way."

Dillon didn't even look at him. He said to Franks, "We're outside watching."

Franks looked up. "Get out, an' stay out!" he said.

Dillon didn't move. "Don't get this thing wrong," he said. "We don't want to start anythin'."

Borg got off his chair. He came over to Dillon fast. He was only a little guy, and fat, but he'd got plenty of guts. "What the hell you blowin' about? Scram, you ain't wanted here."

Dillon looked down at him, sneered, and wandered out. At the door he turned his head. "In about the fifth, Franks," he said, and pulled the door to with a sharp click.

A sudden burst of ironic cheering came to him from the hall. He passed the little runt again, who glowered at him but said nothing.

At the entrance of K Section he saw Gurney and Morgan pushing through to the saloon. Dillon forced his way through the crowd and caught up with them.

"Those two little punks are scared sick of each other," Morgan said, as he came up. "They're just sleepin' off time in each other's arms."

Gurney said, "Did you see Franks?"

Dillon nodded. He leant against the counter, his thumbs hooked in his belt. "He'll be okay," he said.

Gurney poured himself out a shot of bourbon and pushed the bottle over to Morgan. "And Sankey?"

"Sankey's got his nerve back. He's a big shot now the brawl's rigged. That guy's got a yellow streak somewhere."

Morgan didn't like that, but he kept his mouth shut. He wasn't sure of Dillon. "Too bad about Butch," he said, pushing the conversation into safer channels.

Dillon raised his eyebrows. "I ain't heard," he said.

Gurney looked uncomfortable. He hurriedly filled his glass. Under his eyelids, Dillon watched him.

Morgan gave a tinny laugh. "Ain't you heard? Say, it's rich! That little kid of his nearly knocked his block off."

"You're crazy," Dillon said, frowning.

"It sounds like that, but it's on the level. Old Butch comes back from an evenin' out, and catches her with some guy neckin' in the front room. Gee! I'd like to've been there. She didn't have a stitch on. The guy blows his top an' lams through the window. I guess it must've been a scream." Morgan hit his thigh, bending forward, laughing in a hoarse burst.

Dillon eyed him contemptuously.

"Then Butch takes his belt to her and raises a few blisters. Just what's been comin' to that little broad. After he's half skinned her she breaks loose, an' damn if she don't bounce a chair on his dome. I tell you, that dame is sure hot an' wild. She goes on bouncin' that chair until Butch takes the count. He's lying up now, sore as a bear with a boil, an' the kid's runnin' the house, givin' herself airs."

Dillon said, "Who was the guy?"

He knew, by just watching Gurney.

Morgan shrugged. "Butch can't find out," he said. "He figgered the strap would make her talk, but it didn't. She kept her mouth shut. I guess it was a lucky break for that runaway. Butch would've twisted his neck for him."

Gurney mopped his face with a silk handkerchief. Dillon looked at him, but Gurney shifted his eyes.

Dillon said, "We'll go back. They'll be comin' in soon."

The hall was ablaze with light when they walked in. A buzz of talk hummed round the walls. The ring was empty. As they took their seats

the lights began to dim.

The fat men behind them were talking in loud, hoarse voices. "There ain't enough business goin' on tonight," one of them complained. "I'm layin' three to one on Franks. The suckers ain't taking me."

Dillon turned his head. "I'll take five hundred of that," he said.

The two fat men looked at each other, a little startled. Then one of them said, "Sure," but they stopped talking after that.

Gurney nudged Dillon, jerking his head. Beth Franks was coming down the aisle. She slipped into a vacant seat near one of the corners. Her face had a boney, scraped look, and her eyes glittered as if she had a fever.

Gurney whispered, "She's nuts to come here."

Dillon shook his head. "It'll keep Franks' mind right," he said.

The crowd began to yell. Sankey was coming in. The spotlights followed him down the aisle, reflecting on his red dressing gown. He climbed through the ropes, holding one hand above his head.

Gurney said, "Hell! He thinks he's Louis."

Sankey plodded round the ring, keeping his hand up, while half the house groaned at him, and the other half yelled. He had four handlers in white, who stood self-consciously in the corner, waiting for him to get through with his stuff. He came back at last, and stood in his corner, flexing his knees and worrying the ropes.

Morgan cast a look at Dillon. "He's got his nerve back, ain't he?"

Dillon sneered.

Franks came down now. The crowd got to their feet for him. The roof trembled at their roar. The three twisted their heads to watch him come. Franks looked a little fine-drawn, and there were smudges just under his eyes. He had to walk past them to the ring.

Gurney called, "Don't get too tough with him, Harry."

The crowd liked that, and they hooted. Franks didn't look, he kept on.

Beth heard Gurney and she stood up, looking with wild eyes at the three of them sitting on her left. She stared at them for several

seconds, then she sat down again.

Morgan shifted uncomfortably. "She'll know us again," he said.

The other two didn't say anything.

Sankey bounced out of his corner and pushed the rope down for Franks to get through. Franks paused, looking up at him. "Be yourself," he snarled. "Get to hell out of it!"

The crowd thought Sankey was being sporty. They gave him a yell. Franks took the ropes like a hurdle, leaving Sankey still holding them. The crowd liked that too, they hooted and clapped.

They couldn't keep Sankey out of Franks' corner. He went over there and patted Franks' shoulder. The crowd thought it was wonderful.

Franks said, "If you don't keep this sonofabitch away from me, I'll start on him now."

Borg said to Sankey, "Give us a little air, brother, you'll be seein' him too much soon."

Sankey wandered back to his corner, his two fists together, waving to the crowd.

Gurney said, "This bastard'll drive me barmy."

Hank went over to Franks' corner while Borg bandaged his hands. Hank said, "You got enough tape."

Franks looked up at him. "Don't he dumb," he said, "it's soft enough."

A little guy with a handmike got into the ring and started blowing. He got the crowd worked up all right. The only thing worth noting was Franks went six pounds heavier than Sankey.

Gurney was conscious of a dryness in his throat and his heart's heavy thumping. He pushed his hat to the back of his head and rubbed his glistening forehead with his hand. Dillon sat like a rock, his hands limply on his knees and his jaw moving slowly, clamping on the gum.

Gurney watched the referee call the two men in the centre of the ring. Sankey came out, his dressing gown like a cape on his shoulders. Franks only had a towel across his back.

They stood there listening to the referee giving them the same old

line. Gurney wished they'd get on with it.

They went back to their corners cigar smoke spiraled slowly to the ceiling. The crowd was tense, silent and waiting.

Sankey shed his dressing gown, holding on to the ropes, rubbing his shoes in the resin. The handlers bundled themselves out of the ring as the gong rang.

Franks came out cautiously, his chin on his chest. Sankey almost ran at him. He swung a left and a right, but Franks went under them, socking Sankey in the body. Sankey didn't like it; he went into a clinch, roughing Franks round, cuffing his head with half-arm punches that didn't worry Franks. He hung on until the referee smacked his arm, then, as he was going away, Franks caught him with a right swing to the side of his head. The crowd howled with joy. Sankey came back at him, but Franks tied him up in a clinch. They wrestled some more and again Franks caught him as he broke.

Gurney shifted, crossed his legs and uncrossed them. "What the hell's he playin' at?" he asked.

The other two didn't say anything.

Franks was coming in fast again; Sankey backed against the ropes, smothering most of what Franks was handing out to him. Sankey sent over a tremendous right that caught Franks as he was coming in. It caught him too high up to hurt him, but it stopped him, and Sankey got off the ropes and danced away. Franks bored in and they both exchanged short jabs to the head and body. The gong went just as Sankey was getting going. It was Franks' round all right.

The crowd buzzed and buzzed all round them. Gurney sat back, conscious of the sweat that was running down his back. He said to Dillon, "You said the fifth, didn't you?"

Dillon said, "Don't get into a spin. It's in the bag. That punk's got to put up a show."

Sankey lay back in his corner, his face sullen.

Hank flapped a towel over him, telling him to take it easy.

The gong went for the second round.

It was Franks who came out fast this time. He was almost into

Sankey's corner before Sankey got his hands up. The crowd roared at them. Sankey's left jumped into Franks' face, jerking his head back, but he was coming in with such steam that it didn't stop him. He banged Sankey into his corner, bringing both hands hard into his body. You could hear those two blows out in the street.

Sankey jerked up with both of them, his mouth going slack. A wild look came into his eyes, but he kept his hands up. Gurney screamed at him, "Push him off! Get away from him!"

Franks brought over a roundhouse swing. It landed on Sankey's head. Sankey went down on his knee. Franks was keeping cool. He immediately walked away to a neutral corner, letting the referee start a count. The hall shook with the noise. People stood up on their chairs, yelling themselves hoarse.

Morgan's shrill yell drifted to Sankey. "Wait for it! Stay where you are!"

Sankey got up at nine. He seemed all right. Franks came at him, just a little reckless. Sankey saw an opening and lammed in. Franks didn't like it. He was shaken. They were both glad to clinch. And this time Franks missed Sankey when they broke. Sankey kept Franks away with left jabs, running backwards all-round the ring, poking with his left. Franks just wanted to get in and sock. Towards the end of the round Franks got in. Sankey tried to tie him up, but it was like holding on to a buzz-saw. Franks let go four hooks one after the other. They sank into Sankey's ribs, making the crowd give a sighing groan. Sankey's knees went. He was in trouble, trying to keep his hands up when the bell went.

Dillon got to his feet. "Go to his corner," he said to Gurney savagely. "Tell him to fight. He won't last to the fifth at this rate. Let that palok Franks see you. Give him a signal or something."

Gurney pushed his way to the aisle and made his way to Sankey's corner. Hank was working on him desperately. He was looking worried. Gurney said, "For God's sake, you gotta watch that fella."

Sankey glared at him. Great red blotches on his ribs showed the beating he was taking. "A rigged fight, huh?" he snarled. "This sonofabitch's killin' me."

Before Gurney could say anything the gong went. Out came Franks, weaving and bobbing, with Sankey backpedaling, snorting heavily through his nose. Gurney put his elbows on the canvas, watching

closely.

Sankey tried a left, but Franks' head moved, then Franks caught him with a left and a right. Sankey began to bleed from his mouth. He drew his lips off his gum-shield, snarling at Franks. He kept circling until the crowd began to yell at him. He flung over another left that landed as Franks was going away, and tried to follow it up with a terrific right swing. It whistled over Franks' head, who came in close and socked with both hands. Sankey pushed him off and jabbed away, landing too high up to do any damage.

Sankey was getting sore as hell. Every time Franks came in he belted Sankey in the ribs. They were landing solid. Sankey just couldn't keep him out. He was taking an awful beating in the body. The round finished with a flurry in the far corner. Sankey managed to uppercut Franks with the heel of his glove, cutting Franks' nose.

Sankey came back to his corner flatfooted. Gurney could see the muscles in his legs fluttering. He flopped on his stool and his handlers went to work on him.

Gurney said, "Keep him off this round. He's goin' to dive in the fifth."

"I can't stay," Sankey said; he was almost crying. "The bastard's spillin' my guts."

Gurney snarled, "You'll stay all right, or you'll run into more grief outside." He looked across at Franks, who was lying back taking in great lungfuls of air. They weren't even working on him.

The gong went for the fourth.

Sankey went out with a little more spring. He was desperate. He drove a right at Franks, connected, and followed it with a left. Franks went back on his heels, covering up. The crowd rose to their feet, howling.

Gurney shouted, "Get after him . . . beat the hell out of him! . . ."

In went Sankey, swinging punches from all angles. Franks rode the dangerous ones and smothered the wild swings. Then he suddenly jabbed a left in Sankey's face, bringing him up short, and crossed with his right. It caught Sankey between the eyes. There was a sharp silence when Sankey went down on his hands and knees, then the crowd screamed with excitement. Franks went to a corner, opposite Gurney. He was breathing slowly, his great chest rising and falling without effort.

Gurney shouted, "Next round, or you get it!"

Franks showed no sign that he heard.

The referee was standing over Sankey, shouting the count in his ear. Sankey's muscles were fluttering as he tried to drag himself off the canvas. They were all shouting at him. The gong stopped the count at eight.

They got Sankey into his corner by dragging him. Hank gave him a shot of rye, tugging his ears and pouring water on his head. Hank was scared stiff. Dillon came up and leant over the ropes.

"Get a grip on yourself, you big slab of —," he snarled.

"Y're goin' to win in this round. If you don't go out and tear that bastard to bits I'll give you the heat."

Sankey fought down the nagging tiredness. "My left's like lead," he whined.

"Then use your goddam right," Dillon said. "Remember, hit that guy all over the ring. He'll go down."

The gong went for the fifth.

The crowd expected Franks to come out and finish it, but he didn't. He seemed to have suddenly lost his steam. Sankey went straight into a clinch. He hung on, leaning his weight on Franks, until the referee had to shout at him. Franks caught him as he went away, but there was no snap to it. Sankey was breathing like an escape of steam. He jabbed Franks as he came in, and Franks hit him in the ribs, three light blows that didn't even make Sankey flinch. He danced away from Franks, coming down on the flat of his feet. Franks shuffled after him, his hands low. Sankey saw his opening. He'd have been blind if he hadn't seen it. In went his left and cross went his right. It was with an open glove, but they both sounded good. The crowd heaved to their feet. Franks went down on his side.

Gurney gave a little hiss of relief. The crowd screamed and rocked, yelling to Franks to get up. The referee, slightly startled, began to tick off the seconds.

Sankey leant against the ropes, his knees buckling and his face smeared with blood. He couldn't even look pleased.

Franks didn't move, he just lay there.

Beth Franks fought her way to the ringside. She beat on the canvas with her hands. "Get up and fight!" she screamed. "Don't let 'em get away with it! Harry . . . get up and fight!"

Franks took his time, but he got up at nine. The crowd, backing Sankey now, screamed to him to go in and finish Franks. Sankey tottered out of his corner, swearing. Franks stood waiting for him, his lips in a thin line, looking like a killer. There was nothing the matter with him. He was as strong as when he started. As Sankey came on he called Franks every obscene name he could lay his tongue to.

Franks brushed aside his feeble guard and belted him in the ribs. It was an awful punch, landing solid in the church roof of Sankey's chest. Sankey's eyes rolled back. His mouth formed a large "Oh," then, as he fell forward, Franks whipped up a punch that came from his ankles to Sankey's jaw.

It was a waste of the referee's time to count. The crowd went mad. They yelled and hooted as the little guy's arm ticked off the ten. Then, when he threw his arms wide and ran over to raise Franks' glove, they stood on their seats and rattled the roof.

Dillon turned his head and looked at Gurney. His eyes smouldered. "The dirty, double-crossin' sonofabitch," he said through his teeth.

* * *

They all crowded into Butch's shack. There was Gurney, Hank and Morgan. Sankey had gone home, too sullen and furious to come. Dillon shuffled along behind the others, savage and silent.

Butch was sitting in a dirty dressing gown. His head was wrapped in a bandage. He sensed at once that Sankey had flopped when they came in.

Overhead, Myra could hear the uproar that was going on, and she came down the ladder to listen.

Dillon sat on the table, picking his teeth, while the others shouted and cursed. Butch was so mad, Gurney thought he'd have a stroke. He beat

the arms of his chair again and again. "I put all I had on that punk," he bawled; "now where am I?"

Dillon suddenly came to life. "Shut up, you rats!" he snarled. "Franks's got more guts than the bunch of you rolled into one. What does it matter if you lost a little dough?"

There was a terrible silence, each man glaring at Dillon murderously. Butch said in a strangled voice, "You fixed that fight, huh? You ain't losing any dough . . . an' you talk like that?"

Dillon looked him over contemptuously. His eyes went round the others. They began to edge a little towards him, except Gurney. Gurney knew about the gun.

Butch climbed out of his chair. "Bring him to me," he said savagely, flexing his fingers. "I'll teach the bum somethin'."

Dillon's thin lips smiled. His eyes were stony with contempt. "Forget it," he said. "You little punks don't know where you get off."

Butch said, "Leave him to me."

He began to weave forward, his great hands questing. Dillon, sitting on the table, watching, just hunched his shoulders in his coat. Then, when Butch was within a foot of him, the Colt leapt into his hand.

Hank screamed, "Get back, Hogan, he's got a gun!"

Dillon shot Butch low down. The crash of the gun made Myra scream out. She stood outside the door, her hands to her mouth, shuddering.

Butch's blind eyes closed, blotting out the two yellow clots from Dillon's sight. He put his hands over his belly and squeezed. The blood ran through his fingers. Dillon watched him, his smile a little fixed.

Butch went down on his knees with a thud.

Hank and Morgan fought each other to get out of the room. Dillon let them go. He didn't even turn his head. They went out through the verandah, and Gurney heard them running down the road.

The door opened and Myra came in. She stood in the open doorway, her face bony, holding herself upright against the woodwork. She made no move to go across to Butch. She just stood and watched.

Butch died like that, on his knees. He gradually slumped over like a

limp sack of wheat.

Dillon eyed Gurney, then put the gun away inside his coat. "He was crazy to start on me," he said.

Gurney said hoarsely, "You'd better get outta here."

Dillon showed his teeth. "You're comin' with me, pal," he said. "Don't make a mistake about that."

Gurney gulped and said hastily, "Sure . . . I didn't blow like those other paloks."

The two of them looked at Myra. She was suddenly conscious of them, aware that she was now alone, that Butch was finished, and she had to look after herself.

Gurney went over to her. "Shove some things together," he said. "You're comin' with me."

She didn't say anything, but turned and went out of the room with trembling knees.

Dillon said, "Yeah, she'll be useful."

Gurney nodded. "Sure," he said, "I guess she'll be that."

There was a long pause, both men remaining still, their eyes away from Butch. Then Gurney said, "Where we goin'?"

"Over the State line quick," Dillon said. "We'll see when we get there after that."

Myra came in, holding a small leather case.

Gurney said, "Go out an' get into the car."

She turned on her heel and went out.

Dillon went over to Gurney. "We gotta have a little dough before we start," he said. "Maybe you know Abe's got a wad salted away. We're goin' to lift that. I know where it is."

Gurney licked his lips. "It ain't safe," he said nervously. "The sheriff'll be along pretty soon."

Dillon said, "I'm tellin' you . . . not askin' you."

They went out into the darkness, climbing into the old car. Myra was sitting at the back. She was holding on to her nerves, but she couldn't stop herself shivering. The car lurched on to the main road, and the gears grated as Gurney changed up.

It didn't take them long to get to Abe's store. The place was in darkness. Dillon climbed out of the car. He leant forward and took the ignition key. Gurney watched him, feeling trapped. Then Dillon said, "You stay here. I ain't goin' to be long."

He walked round to the back, opening the door with a Silently he moved down the dark corridor, until he came to the shop.

Abe was adding figures in a ledger, a skull-cap on Ins head, and his face alive with intent satisfaction. He glanced up when Dillon came in. "Was it a good fight?" he asked, keeping one bony finger on the ledger page, nailing down a figure, as if he were frightened that it would escape him.

Dillon said, "Stay where you are. Don't start a squawk." He held the Colt so that Abe could see it.

Abe laid down his pen . . . His old fingers trembled a little. "My Rose was wrong," he said sadly.

Dillon walked to where Abe hid the day's takings. They were in a coffee tin, up on a shelf. He reached up and took it down. Abe sat with his hands in his lap, quite crushed.

"I guess I want this more'n you," Dillon said, emptying the tin on the counter. There were just over a hundred dollars in small bills in the tin. Dillon scooped them into his pocket. He said, "I guess I'll take your wad too . . . maybe you'll use a bank after this."

Abe gave a groan. "You ain't givin' me a break," he said. "That money took some earning."

Dillon opened the till, pulled the drawer right out, and put his hand in the gap. He felt round the wood carefully, found the wad of notes in the false drawer, took them out and put them in his pocket. "Two grand, ain't it, Goldberg?" he said. "I've watched you count it enough times."

Abe said, "I guess this is the last time I'll help any bum."

Dillon sneered. "Aw, can that," he said. "Suckers like you go on givin'

a hand till they're buried."

While he was speaking Dillon moved round the store putting some tinned food together. He shoved them roughly into a large paper carrier. "We're makin' a trip," he said. "I'd hate to steal this stuff from you . . . see, I'll pay you for it." He tossed three dollars on to the counter.

Abe said nothing. He just wanted Dillon to go away. He kept thinking how he was to tell Rosey. She'd never forgive herself.

Dillon picked up the carrier and walked over to the door. "Maybe, when I get the breaks, I'll remember you, Goldberg . . . then maybe I won't . . . you see."

He walked out into the night, tossed the carrier into the car and climbed in. He gave the key to Gurney. "State line, fast," he said.

Gurney started the engine and engaged the gears. They pulled out of Plattsville as the street clock struck two, and headed for the border.

part two

Myra swung her legs off the bed and sat up. The sun came through the open window, burning her feet. The cheap clock on the mantleboard indicated 8.10. She sat there, sniffing the crisp air, her firm white body naked. She fished about with her feet, hunting for her shoes. Finally, with a little gasp of annoyance, she went on hands and knees and dug them out from under the bed.

She knelt there staring at the shoes. "By heck," she said, "I'm getting a regular bum." The shoes were just about handing in their checks. Two large cracks gaped like little mouths at her from the top, and the soles were as good as a sieve.

She sat back on her heels, scratching her thigh, thinking. It wasn't from choice she was naked in bed. She just hadn't anything to wear.

Three long weary weeks had crawled by since Butch had been knocked off. The cabin, hidden in the hills, was just held together by its paint. Dillon had been glad to move into it, and now he was in he just stuck.

The last owner had been an Okie, who had taken his family with him on the futile search for work in the Californian invasion. He had left the cabin pretty well as it stood. Even the bedding had been left. That Okie had certainly been in a hurry to get away.

Taking the car to the nearest small town, Dillon had got in enough stores to last for some time, and the three of them had dug themselves in. The cabin was lonely, off the beaten track, and they didn't see anyone from dawn to dusk.

Dillon spent most of his time lying in bed, brooding. He got up around midday, had some food, and sat on the step of the cabin in the sun. He got on the other two's nerves. The work was shoved on to Myra. Gurney cut the wood and got the water, but he didn't do much else. He hung around the house, treading on Myra's heels, keeping his hands off her with an effort, and generally eating his head off with boredom.

Myra was getting sick of it. She wasn't taking any chances in getting laid up, so she kept Gurney out of her room. This made Gurney sore as

hell, but Myra's waspish temper stood between them like a wall.

She got to her feet and put on the shoes, wriggling her toes inside them, feeling the rough boards through the soles. She splashed water into a tin bowl and began to wash. Slapping the water on her body, she rubbed herself briskly. All the time she was doing this her mind was busy. It was time to, shake these bums up a bit, she thought. Dillon would have to be handled carefully. Up to now he had ignored her. That irritated her. He just didn't know she was there. She thought he was a cold-blooded fish. She walked over to the stool where she had dropped her clothes. She turned them over, her nose wrinkling with disgust. Every damn garment was in holes. Even her dress was patched heavily under the arms.

Pulling the dress over her head, she smoothed the creases with her hands. Then she walked into the living room.

Gurney was standing in the open doorway, fixing his belt. He nodded to her sourly. He thought he was having a swell break bringing her along, and then to have her lock herself in every night. His chin was covered with a stubbly beard, and his eyes, still puffy with sleep, peered at her hungrily.

Across the way was another little room, where Dillon slept. The door was shut. They didn't expect to see him for some time.

Myra said, "Suppose you get the fire goin'." She spoke shortly.

Gurney said, "Sure." He wandered outside and came back with a handful of wood. He sat down in front of the small stove and began to poke at the ashes.

Myra filled the kettle and began to lay the table. When the wood in the stove was crackling Gurney got up and put the kettle on. He walked round the room, scratching himself under the arms, yawning. His eyes were on Myra. She didn't take any notice of him, but she could feel his lust for her.

He came up behind her, slipping his arms round her, his hands over her breasts. He hugged her to him.

Myra stood quite still. "Get away, will you?" she snapped. "There's work to do."

Gurney forced her round. "I'm sick of this," he said savagely. "I ain't goin' to stand it."

He lifted her off her feet and ran her into her room. Myra made no effort to resist him. In the room, he set her down, arid stood holding her, his chest heaving.

She said, "You're gettin' wrong ideas, Nick."

"Yeah?" He shook her a little. "That's what you think. You're enough to drive a guy nuts . . . What's the idea? You're hot enough when Butch might've killed you . . . but now . . ."

She kept her face cold. "The kettle's boiling," she said. "Suppose you come down to earth."

Gurney took his hands off her. "By God!" he said angrily. "You can't treat me like this."

A furious wave of rage shot through her like a flame. "And what d'you think this is?" she screamed at him. "Look at me! How d'you think I like this? There's not a rag to my back. All you think is gettin' into bed. Well, you got another think coming. That lousy punk out there's got a roll of dough, and he just sits on it. How long d'you think we're goin' to stay in this sty? Who the hell are you to get sore?"

Gurney backed away uneasily. "Pipe down," he said surlily, "I can't help it, can I?"

"You can't help it!" She beat her hands together. "I'll show you something."

She pushed past him and burst in on Dillon. Dillon was sitting up in bed. He was wearing a shirt and trousers, a splinter of wood between his teeth. He looked at her suspiciously. "What the hell do you want, bustin' in like this?" he snarled.

"I'll tell you what I want," she stormed at him. "I want to get out of here. I want some dough to buy things with . . . I'm sick of messing around working for a couple of ragged-arse bums like you for nothin'. Look at me . . . look at this dress . . ."

Dillon swung his legs over the edge of the bed and got up. Gurney stood in the open doorway. He was scared. Dillon hunched his shoulders. "Listen," he said. "You just get out quick or I'll toss you out. I'm the boss of this outfit, see?"

Myra sneered at him. She stood with her legs planted wide and her hands on her hips. "You couldn't be a boss of any outfit, you smalltime

gunman,” she said. “Get that into your thick dome Now come on, let's have some dough.”

Dillon swung his fist and hit her on the side of her head. It was a solid punch. She hurtled across the room, banging her shoulder against the rough wood, and falling in a heap.

Gurney said feebly from the door, “Hey! You can't knock her around like that.”

Dillon looked at him. His cold eyes were glittering. “Keep out of this,” he said; “she had it comin' to her. She ain't goin' to get anywhere with that line of talk.”

Myra scrambled to her feet. She held her hand to her head. The ground rose a little under her feet. She focused Dillon with difficulty. “You devil!” she said.

Dillon hitched his trousers up and walked over to her. “Get out an' put some food together. You're here to work, see? I ain't havin' any hot air from you.”

She looked over his shoulder at Gurney. “Think you're going to crawl in my bed after this, you yellow rat . . . you've got some chance.”

Dillon said, “You shut up!”

Gurney turned and went into the front room. He guessed Myra would give him hell for this. Dillon didn't take his eyes off Myra. He remembered the way she bounced Butch around. This dame was dangerous. Myra looked at him, her eyes hating him. “You ain't going to get away with this,” she said through her teeth. “I'll fix you, you dirty heel!”

Dillon said, “Aw, can it!” He moved away, still keeping his eyes open.

Myra hesitated, then walked into the front room. Gurney gave her a scared look, but she took no notice of him. She began to prepare the meal. She cut the ham into thick hunks, savagely sawing at the salty meat, and slapping the slices into the pan.

Gurney expected her to cry. He guessed most dames would have folded up from a smack like that. Myra's face was white and set. A livid mark, where Dillon had hit her, burnt on her temple, and her eyes were stormy.

Gurney said uneasily, "You ain't goin' to get nowhere, startin' to fight that guy."

Myra said nothing. She served the food, banging the plates on the table. Then, pouring herself out a cup of strong coffee, she went out into the sunshine and sat away from the cabin.

Dillon came in, looked at the food and grunted. He sat down at the table and began to eat. Gurney sat down.

"You gettin' sick of things?" Dillon said. There was a tense threat in his voice.

Gurney slopped his coffee. "Me? . . . I ain't squealin'," he said hurriedly.

Dillon jerked his head to where Myra was sitting. "I figgered maybe you put her up to that."

Gurney was round-eyed with innocence. "You got me wrong," he said hurriedly. "You ain't got to worry about her. She's just mad at havin' nothin' to wear."

Dillon cut the ham up in small squares. "You have a talk with her . . . she'd better watch her step. I ain't standin' any buck from her—get it?"

Gurney pushed his plate away and lit a cigarette. The food stuck in his throat. "Sure," he said, "she's just a kid . . . you know, she don't mean a thing."

Dillon said evenly: "You tell her . . . unless you want me to give her a rubdown. You want to handle that broad . . . what you scared about? Why the hell don't you throw her on the bed?"

Pushing back his chair, Gurney got to his feet. He mumbled something and went over to fix the stove.

"I'm goin' to take the car out," Dillon said, finishing his food and getting up. "I've a little job I wantta case. Maybe you can do somethin' with it later."

Gurney looked at him uneasily, but said nothing.

Myra watched the two men come out of the cabin and walk over to the shed where the car was garaged. She got up and went in, clearing the table and stacking the plates. She was still trembling with

suppressed rage. She heard the car drive off, and she ran to the window. Dillon was sitting at the wheel.

Gurney came in. "He's gone downtown," he said.

Myra sat down on the wooden bench under the window. "I want to talk to you," she said, her words coming tense and harsh. "It's time you got wise to this guy."

Gurney scratched the back of his head. "I don't get this," he said.

"You ain't goin' to get anything from him. Don't you think it. He's got that scratch from Abe Goldberg . . . has he given you any? Not a chance! You're running around with him, an' he's tied an accessory rap on you. He's the boss, an' you jumpin' in circles. You're just a goddam sucker, scared by a bum like that."

Gurney shifted. "That guy totes a—rod," he said. "What can I do?"

Myra's eyes glittered. "I'm goin' to tell you what you're goin' to do. You're goin' to 'yes' that guy until you get the run of his game, then you're goin' to turn him in. You're goin' to have a gun, an' you're goin' to shoot better than he shoots. You're goin' to do everything better than he does. Then he goes "

Gurney stood looking at her. Then he nodded his head slowly. "Sure," he said thoughtfully. "That's an idea."

* * *

The sun was tailing behind the hills when Dillon got back.

Gurney heard the old engine faintly in the distance, and he went out, standing by the well, looking down the rough road. He wondered where the hell Myra had got to. She had slipped off after the midday meal, and he hadn't seen her since. Restless and bored with his own company, the sound of the car chugging up the hill came as a relief.

He had spent most of the afternoon wandering round the cabin, brooding. He felt that Myra had a good idea, ditching Dillon. He was scared of the guy. He couldn't bring himself to think how Dillon was to be ditched. Unconsciously, he left that for Myra to fix. Sitting on

the step in the sunshine, he had gone over everything Myra had said. That dame had a head all right. She'd got Dillon pinned down. Yeah, she was right. Dillon was a mean guy. He'd run them for a while, then leave them flat. Gurney's hands ached for the feel of a gun. Just give him a gun and he'd fix Dillon okay.

Dillon drew up outside the cabin. He waved his hand to Gurney. His sullen face seemed more animated. Gurney came over.

"You been away some time," he said. "You get the breaks?"

Dillon climbed out of the car and went round the back. He reached in and dragged out a bulky object covered with a blanket. "Come inside," he said, "I got somethin' to show you."

Gurney followed him in. Dillon dumped the bundle on the table and carefully unwrapped it.

Gurney stood quite still, his heart beating hard. "Well by God!" he said.

Lying on the table was a Thompson riot gun, a heavy 45 Smith & Wesson, and a large case of shells.

Dillon patted the Thompson, his thin lips curving a little. "A guy who's got a thing like that can get most places," he said.

A shadow fell across the table. They looked up sharply. Myra stood in the doorway, her eyes fixed on the gun. The two men took their eyes away from her, and forgot her in the gun.

"How the hell did you get that?" Gurney asked. He picked up the .45 and caressed the cold butt. It felt good.

Dillon was in an expansive mood. He wandered over to the bench under the window and sat down. "Once you know the tricks," he said, "it's easy."

Myra went over to the table and stood looking. She cautiously put her hand on the cold barrel of the Thompson.

Dillon watched her. His triumphant mood included her. "Pick it up," he said. "It ain't goin' to bite."

She held the Thompson, the butt tucked under her arm. The long barrel pointed to the stove. She let her hand run over the smooth

drum.

Gurney watched her. His mouth was dry with excitement. Maybe this guy wasn't such a bum after all, he thought. "You didn't find that growin' on a tree," he said.

Dillon shook his head. "These guns don't get picked up easy," he said, hooking his thumbs in his belt. "Know how I got it?" His thin lips grinned at them. Myra watched him, her face blank, but her eyes hated him. Dillon didn't feel her. He was big-shotting himself to death.

"I went into the sheriff's office an' bought it off him," he said.

"That's a hell of a tale," Gurney said. The admiration in his voice pleased Dillon.

"Listen, bozo," Dillon said. "This country's nuts. Every goddam flatfoot has to buy his own rod. They give him everything else, but not his gun. He has to lay down cash for it. Okay; there comes a time when a sheriff gives over, see? Maybe he gives over 'cause he's too old, or maybe he's sick or somethin'. Well, that guy wants to buy a business or a farm or live on his savings. What the hell does he want with a gun? What's he to do then? Some guy blows in an' makes him an offer. He gets an offer twice as good as he'd get if he turned the rod over to a gunsmith. It ain't legal sellin' Thompsons to anyone, but what the hell? He's out for good, so he should worry."

Gurney said, "You got this from a sheriff?" His voice was incredulous.

Dillon nodded. "Sure I did." He reached forward and picked up the .45. "I went into town today an' got talkin'. Some guy said the sheriff in the next town was closin' down, so I grabbed the car an' went out to see him. That little lot set me back a good few bucks, but that ain't goin' to worry me. A Tommy talks any time."

Myra recognized this much. Dillon knew the ropes. Gurney wasn't in the same street with him for ideas. He knew where to get things and how to get them. This guy could teach them something.

She said, making her voice soft, "I guess that's smart."

Dillon looked at her hard, but Myra's eyes were wide with admiration. He grunted. "I guess I know my way around," he said.

"Can you work this?" Gurney said, tapping the Thompson.

Dillon stood up. "Can I work it?" He picked it up and walked outside. "You watch me."

Myra and Gurney followed him out. They did not look at each other, but Myra put her hand on Gurney's arm, gripping his muscle. Gurney nodded his head, still keeping his eyes on Dillon's back.

Dillon looked round thoughtfully, selecting a target. "You ain't got to worry about aimin' this gun, he said; "you spray it, see? You just gotta hold it steady an' bring it round slow in a sweep . . . like this."

He raised the gun, levelling it at the garage door, then he pressed the trigger. The shattering roar of the gun made Myra take an involuntary step backwards. Chips of white wood flew from the door. From where they stood they could see the holes spring up in the woodwork in an even line.

Dillon stopped firing and turned to look at them. "See?" he said. "That's the way. This gun's goin' to stop anythin' on two legs."

Myra came over to him. "I bet I could do that," she said.

Dillon looked down at her, hesitating. Then his good-humour overcame his caution. He gave the gun to her. "You gotta hold her."

Myra pressed the butt into her side, her finger curling round the trigger, then she squeezed. The gun jumped about in her hand as if it were alive. The dry mud puffed up and the leaves from the trees overhanging the garage fell in a shower; she winged the door twice.

Dillon said, "Take it easy . . . you gotta hold that gun."

Gurney was itching to try. He looked at Dillon, trying to catch his eye. Myra held the gun, looking at it thoughtfully, then she shoved it in Gurney's hands.

Dillon scowled. "Hey," he said, "those shells cost dough!"

Gurney was not to be put off. He raised the gun and fired off a round. The wood splinters again spurted. He could see he'd drawn a line of holes almost as well as Dillon.

Myra said, "You ain't so good as this guy."

That pleased Dillon. Anyway, that's why she said it. He took the gun from Gurney and walked back to the cabin Gurney followed close

behind him.

They both sat and watched Dillon clean the gun. Every now and then Myra would ask a question. She asked it in a way that touched Dillon's vanity. He talked all right. They learnt a lot about that gun while he was cleaning it.

Gurney helped Dillon hide the case of shells, and they put the gun under Dillon's bed. Then they came back to the sitting room.

Dillon sat on the edge of the table and looked at Gurney. "There's a small bank down there that might be worth workin' over I'd do it if I'd someone to drive the car."

Myra said quietly, "I'll drive the car."

Dillon jerked his head round. "What the hell do you know about a car?" he said shortly. "A getaway is the main thing in a bank stick-up. The guy who handles the wheel's got to use his head. He's got to drive like hell an' keep on drivin' like hell."

Myra shrugged. "I guess nobody's goin' to drive like hell in that old jaloopy," she said.

"Who said I was going in her?" Dillon demanded. "You don't know a thing about this business. I'll knock a car off when I'm ready. A real fast job, with enough steam under the hood to shake anythin' on four wheels."

"Get a bus like that," Myra said, "an' I'll drive it."

Dillon began to get angry. "Will you keep your goddam nose outta this?" he snarled. "This ain't for you, so shut up."

Myra got up and walked to the door. "Yeah?" she said. "Then watch this."

She ran over to the old car outside, slipped under the wheel and started the engine. She had that old bus going forty before she was out of sight. She had changed up, one—two—three—almost in so many seconds. Back she came, swinging the wheel so that the wheels on the offside lifted and slammed back, nearly jerking her out of the car. She pushed the old bus right up to the cabin, making Dillon and Gurney jump to their feet before she nailed it dead. She got out of the car and walked into the cabin again.

Dillon looked at her. There was a look of astonishment in his eyes, but he kept his face blank.

“She can handle a car all right,” Gurney said to him. “I guess she wouldn’t lose her nerve.”

Dillon hesitated and then he nodded. “Sure,” he said. “I guess we’ll knock that bank tomorrow.”

Behind his back the two exchanged glances.

* * *

The big Cadillac settled down to business. Myra kept the pedal on the boards, holding the car to the crown of the road. Gurney was beside her, and Dillon sat at the back. He held the Thompson by his side, covered with a blanket.

It was just after three o’clock, and the afternoon sun was hot. It reflected on the white road and shimmered across the green fields.

They’d had the breaks all right. It was not just chance. Dillon had gone over everything with a thoroughness that surprised the other two. First he made a map on a piece of white card. The bank was plotted right in the centre. He had made arrangements for getting away in three different ways. “It’s like this,” he explained. “We come out with the dough. Maybe some guy puts up a squawk. Okay. The sheriff might’ve grabbed himself a car and come beating down here.” He traced a line on the map. “We gotta go this way. Maybe he’ll come from this direction. We ain’t got time to swing the bus round, so we beat it to the right. With this map we got three getaways.” He had pinned the map just above the windscreens, over Myra’s head. He’d taken Myra through that map until she was sick of it.

“You gotta keep your nut,” he had told her. “I’ll be right with you, but you gotta go where I say, an’ go quick. You ain’t gotta argue . . . you gotta drive.”

When Dillon was through with her, he started on Gurney. He showed Gurney how to pull the gun, and how to shoot. Dillon said to him, “You ain’t to pop that heater. You leave that to me. There’s only two punks in that bank, an’ those guys ain’t goin’ to cause trouble. They

got a wife, an' maybe they got kids. All you gotta do is to collect the dough and get out quick."

Gurney had the .45 under his coat. It made him feel good. He was excited, and he wasn't scared any more.

The jaloopy had been hidden in a wood some twenty miles from the bank. Dillon hadn't any trouble knocking off the Cadillac. It just stood in the main street asking to be knocked off. Even the engine was running, while some guy did his weekend store buying. That bus certainly could move.

They began to run into the town. Dillon edged himself forward, so that his head came between the two in the front. "Take it easy," he said. "Just run up and stop without any fuss."

Myra said, between her teeth, "What the hell you think I'd do? Turn the goddam thing over, and push it down the street on its roof?" Her heart was banging against her ribs.

Dillon sat back. "You keep your nut," was all he said. Taking the blanket off the Thompson, he pulled the gun across his knees, his left hand on the car door.

Gurney pulled the .45 from inside his coat. He held it in his lap. His mouth was very dry.

They pulled up outside the bank.

Myra shoved out the clutch, put the gear in bottom, and revved the engine hard. She said, "Don't take all day."

Dillon put his Colt automatic beside her. "Maybe you better have that."

Myra slipped the gun under her, and sat on it. The butt was just under her hand.

Swinging the door open, Dillon ran across the pavement and entered the bank. The Thompson was under his coat. Gurney came in at his heels. There was a fat woman wedged against the grille, arguing with the teller. Gurney could hear her voice putting up a squawk. His brain was stiff. He couldn't get what she was saying.

A thin, lanky man got off a stool at the far end of the bank and wandered down when he saw Dillon.

“Stand by the door,” Dillon said to Gurney.

The lanky guy said, “We’re closin’ down right now,” he sounded as if he were bored to hell with the bank.

“Grab some air,” Dillon yelled, pitching his voice high, “this is a stick-up.” The Thompson showed its black barrel.

The two guys behind the counter stiffened into waxworks.

The fat woman turned her head. Dillon was right behind her. She took one look at him and her big mouth opened. Gurney nearly dropped his gun. “That dame’s going to yell the roof off,” he thought.

Dillon shifted the gun a little and swung his fist. He hit the woman across her mouth with his knuckles. There was a lot of steam in that punch. She was right up against the counter, so she couldn’t ride the punch. It made a real mess of her face. She flopped down on her knees and then spread out. A whistling sound dribbled from her throat. Without taking his eyes from the other two, Dillon kicked at her head. He kicked her just once. The woman’s head bounced away from his boot. She stopped making any noise.

The lanky guy suddenly went green, and vomited on the floor in front of him. He didn’t lower his hands, but just bent his head forward.

Dillon said to Gurney, “Hey! This bastard’s been eatin’ ice cream.”

Gurney wasn’t feeling so good himself. He scrambled over the grille. The two watched him with wide eyes. They were scared to death.

Gurney went through the drawers, piling the notes on the counter. Dillon stood watchful, holding the Thompson ready. He said, “Get the safe open.” He looked hard at the teller.

Gurney grabbed the teller’s arm. “Get it open!” he snarled, pushing the .45 into his ribs. “Get goin’, you sonofabitch.”

The teller staggered across to the vault, his knees buckling. Gurney could see the sweat running down behind his ears into his collar. The teller pulled open the door. It wasn’t even locked. He tried to say something, but he was so scared he couldn’t get his tongue working.

Gurney grabbed the money, done up in neat packets. There wasn’t a lot, but he took everything he could see. He left the coin. Then he ran back to the counter and shoved all the money into a small flour sack

he'd brought with him. He vaulted over the grille again.

Dillon said, "Get goin'." He stood by the door until Gurney was out, then he began to back out. "Don't start anythin'," he snarled at the lanky guy. "This typewriter'll cut you to hell."

He turned and ran. Myra was already rolling the car. As he sprang on the running board the Cadillac shot forward with a jerk that nearly threw him loose.

The car lurched with screaming tyres as she pulled into the centre of the road. Dillon tossed the Tommy into the back seat and clung to the running board, trying to get in. "Gimme a hand, you bastard!" he yelled at Gurney.

Gurney grabbed Dillon's arm, pulling him forward. Another lurch tossed Dillon head first into the car. He scrambled to his knees, swearing savagely.

Myra gritted her teeth. At the back of her mind she had hoped to lose Dillon. She had not consciously tried to ditch him, but now he was safe she knew that she had tried to shake him.

The Cadillac went down the main street with a rush. The quivering needle of the speedometer swung to seventy. Faintly above the swish of tyres and the scream of the wind they could hear people shouting.

Myra gripped the wheel, her eyes fixed on the road that seemed to jump up from the ground and rush to meet her. Another car coming from the opposite direction crowded on brakes as the Cadillac hurtled down on it. Myra touched the wheel and swept by. The open road lay in front.

Dillon glanced through the rear window. The road was deserted. He sat back on the seat and wiped off his palms. He was tossed about in the back as the car tore down the rough road.

Gurney twisted his head and grinned at him. "Just like that," he shouted.

Dillon didn't say anything. He was looking murder. He wasn't sure if Myra had tried to ditch him. He knew it was a mighty close thing. Gurney was still clutching the sack. Dillon leant forward and took it from him. Gurney looked round, a little startled, but Dillon's cold eyes made him flinch. "Take it easy," Dillon shouted to Myra, "we ain't goin' to turn this can over."

Myra eased the pressure on the pedal and the Cadillac dropped down to fifty.

Gurney said, "It was a cinch."

Dillon sneered. "Sure, but it could've been tough."

They drove in silence for the next few miles. Gurney was feeling uneasy. He knew that if he'd let Dillon alone he'd have been shaken off the running board. He knew Dillon knew it. What the hell was Myra playing at? This guy Dillon was too tricky to double-cross.

Myra ran the Cadillac off the road when they came to the wood where the jaloopy was hidden. They all got out, leaving the Cadillac hidden from the road.

Dillon took two quick steps away from the other two. His face was hard and threatening. He slightly raised the Tommy. "Put your rod on the ground," he said to Gurney. "You keep away from the car," he went on to Myra.

The two stood very still. Myra found her voice. "What's the big idea?" she said, her voice suppressed.

"I want those rods . . . maybe you didn't try to hang it on me in the car, but I ain't takin' any chances with you. Snap into it. Drop that gun, Gurney."

Gurney let the gun fall on the grass. He stepped away from it. His face was a little white. He was scared.

Dillon picked the gun up and shoved it down the waistband of his trousers. He walked over to the Cadillac and took the gun lying on the seat. "Okay," he said, "I guess that's all. We'll run back to the cabin now in the jalopy."

The two didn't say anything. Gurney got under the wheel and Myra got in beside him. Dillon climbed in at the back. They drove away, leaving the Cadillac.

When they reached the cabin Dillon went straight to his room and shut himself in. They heard the bar fall in its socket, bolting him in.

Myra stood very still, looking at Gurney. "We ain't gettin' anywhere with this guy," she said, keeping her voice low. "He's gotta lot comin' to him."

Gurney slouched over to the bench and sat down. He rubbed the back of his neck thoughtfully, looking hard at his feet. Myra stared at him for a moment, then she began getting a meal together.

They didn't see Dillon until supper was on the table. He came out of his room, a cold, triumphant look on his face. He was conscious of the hard glances from the other two. Sitting down at the table, he began to shovel the food into his mouth. The other two just sat and watched him. After a moment he looked up irritably. "What the hell's the matter with you?" he demanded fiercely. "Ain't you hungry?"

Myra said, "Did we get much outta that bank?"

Dillon sneered at her. "You ain't gotta worry about that," he said. "You're here to work, see?" He took some notes out of his pocket and tossed them across the table to Gurney. "That's your split," he said evenly, and went on eating.

Gurney looked at the notes as if he couldn't believe his eyes. He poked at them with his finger.

Myra said, her voice very brittle, "Count 'em."

Gurney couldn't count them. He just sat and stared at them.

Myra leant forward and snatched up the notes. She counted them out on the table, slapping them down and counting aloud. She made it a hundred dollars.

Dillon went on eating, his eyes on his plate. There was a little circle of white round his mouth. He was getting mad all right.

Myra said with a little hiss of breath, "What's this?"

Dillon looked up at Gurney. "You let this bitch talk too much," he said. He tossed the knife and fork on to his plate with a clatter and sat back. His hands lay on the table, his ringers tapping.

Gurney said with a little rush, "A hundred bucks ain't much."

"Don't you stand for this," Myra shrilled, pushing the notes away from her. "He's double-crossing you."

Dillon stood up, kicking over his chair. His eyes glittered. "I've told you," he snarled at Gurney, "I ain't standin' any more of it. That bitch gets outta here, see? You're crazy to have her here . . . well, this

finishes it . . . she's out!"

Gurney looked up at him, his face drawn and glistening, but he knew he was up against Myra. "Say, listen," he said, "somethin' is wrong. You don't mean this's all I get out of the stick-up?"

Dillon eyed him. "You gone nuts?" he demanded savagely. "What the hell d'you think you're goin' to get out of it?"

"A hundred bucks is peanut money."

Dillon sneered. "Sure it's peanut money. What of it? You didn't case the job, did you? You didn't fix the plans, did you? You didn't know where to find the bank, did you? Like hell you didn't. You just went in there and picked the dough outta the safe. A goddam monkey could've done it."

Gurney dropped his eyes. Dillon had him.

"I'm givin' you that hundred bucks, an' you can like it. When you've used that nut of yours an' pulled somethin' good, then we'll split even, but not before."

"You double-crossing rat!" Myra screamed at him. "What do I get out of it? Didn't I drive the car?"

Dillon looked at her. "You ain't nothin' to me," he said, his lips grinning. "That punk brought you. It's up to him to give you somethin'."

He turned his back and walked into his room. They heard the bolt slam in the socket.

The moon floated high. From his bed Gurney could see every object clearly in the room. The window was wide open, but no air came to him. He was feeling hot and uneasy, lying there. He knew he couldn't sleep. His mind dwelt on Dillon. He thought of the hundred dollars, and he sweated with fury. When Dillon had gone into his room, Myra had disappeared into hers. She hadn't said a word to Gurney.

Sitting up impatiently, Gurney glanced at the battered clock on the mantelshelf. It was just after one. He sat up and swung his legs to the ground. His mind, restless and frustrated, made his body uneasy. He wanted Myra. He wanted her so badly that it made him feel weak. There she was just across the room, behind that door. He had only to go in there and take her. He knew he could force her. Maybe she

would fight, but he'd have her in the end. Then he lay back on his elbow, savagely gnawing at his lip. He knew he hadn't the nerve to go in there and start anything. She was too well guarded by herself. She was too strong for him.

He sat up again, his eyes wide. Her door was opening quietly. He felt his heart hammering against his ribs, and he began to breathe unsteadily. He could see the flicker of the candle behind her, making her shadow dance before her. She raised her hand and beckoned him. He slid across the room quickly, without a sound. She took his arm and pulled him into the room and shut the door.

He was surprised and disappointed to see that she was still dressed. Her white face, and her eyes, hard and bright like glass, frightened him. He put his back to the door and stared at her.

“What is it?” he said, keeping his voice down.

“Don't you know?” she said. “We ain't taking any more from that lousy heel. He's gotta go.”

Gurney stared at her, his mouth going dry. “But how?” he whispered.

“You gotta get into that room an' knock him off,” she said.

Gurney recoiled. “You're nuts,” he said. “That guy's got three guns in there.”

Her face was close to his. “He's got a lot of dough in there as well. We gotta do it, Nick, can't you see? We won't get anywhere unless we do.”

Gurney walked round her and sat on the bed. “I tell you it can't be done,” he said, slamming his fist down on his knee. “What you thinking about? I tell you that guy's got three rods, and he'll just fall over himself to put some slugs into both of us.”

Myra came over to him and sat close. She put her arms round his neck. He could feel the warmth of her body pressing against him. He could feel the curve of her breast against his arm. He turned, dragging her over his knees, gripping her tight, his blood singing in his ears. She let him kiss her, then she broke away from him and stood up.

He sat there, shaken with desire for her. He said fiercely, “I gotta have you, Myra.” He reached out for her. “I can't wait . . . damn you . . . I gotta have you.”

Myra's voice came like a cold douche. "Get a grip on yourself, Nick . . . Dillon first . . . you'll never have me if you don't get that bastard . . . and you've got to get him now."

Gurney got to his feet. He leant forward. "Do you mean it?" he said, his voice harsh.

She stood there looking at him. "I mean it all right," she said.

"What've I gotta do?" He relied on her.

Myra moved round the room, thinking. Gurney could only watch her. His brain refused to work. He had only eyes for her, raking her from head to foot.

She said at last, "We mustn't slip up on this, Nick."

Gurney didn't say anything.

"Give him a chance, an' he'll finish both of us." She moved to the door. "Wait, I'll be right back."

Gurney wiped his sweating palms on the sheet.

She came back into the room again. He caught the flash of steel. "What've you got there?" he said, his voice just a croak. She showed him. The short blade of the knife flashed in the candlelight. He looked at her, his eyes popping. He started to say something, but stopped.

She sat down on the bed beside him. "Listen," she said, "we'll do it this way. When we're set, I'm goin' to start yellin'. I'm goin' to bring the roof down. He'll come in quick enough to see what's wrong. I'll give him the line that you attacked me, an' you've gotta get tough. When he's talkin' to you, I'll come up behind him an' stick him with this. As soon as the knife's in, you slam him one from the front. Watch his gun—he'll bring that out all right. He might start shootin' unless I kill him on his feet."

Sweat ran down Gurney's face. "By God!" he said. "I don't like this."

Myra jerked impatiently. "It's goin' to work—you see."

"A knife ain't goin' to stop this bastard," Gurney said; "don't you think it will."

Myra hesitated. She guessed maybe Gurney was right about that. Then she said, "We'll give it him like he gave it to Butch." She slipped into

the outer room and came back almost immediately. She gave Gurney a small tin of pepper. Gurney looked at the tin and twisted his mouth into a grin.

“Yeah,” he said, and stood up.

“Wait for a break,” Myra warned him, “then toss the lot in his face. You make a mess of that, an’ you an’ me won’t last long.”

Gurney nodded his head. His hands were shaking, but he was cooling down.

Myra pulled off her dress. She ran her hands through her hair, mussing it. Gurney pulled her to him. He could smell her, the acid odour of sweat and the woman of her. She pulled his head down to her mouth, forcing herself against him. They stood like that for several moments, straining to each other. Then Myra broke away from him, and stumbled over to the bed. Her face was dazed with the desire for him.

Gurney said between his teeth, “Start squawkin’.” He wanted to get this over.

Myra began to scream—high-pitched screams that jarred Gurney’s nerves. She stopped for a moment, then, when they heard the bolt slide back with a crash in Dillon’s room, she started again.

Gurney shouted, “Shut up!”

“Get out . . . get out!” she screamed at him.

Dillon said from the door, “What the hell’s goin’ on?”

Gurney jerked his head. “She’s gone nuts!”

Dillon advanced into the room. His face was cold and suspicious. Myra saw the gun in his hand. She sat up in the bed, her eyes wild. “Get him out of here,” she screamed to Dillon, “I won’t have him here.”

Dillon said with a little snarl, “Pipe down . . . what the hell do you think this is?” He turned his head and looked at Gurney. “You better get out of this. If you gotta lay this bitch, why the hell didn’t you knock her cold first? Suppose some car passed an’ came up to see what was wrong? You two screwy or somethin’?”

Myra got off the bed. She kept the knife behind her back. She said in a

frightened voice, "You must help me. Please keep this devil out of my room. I know you ain't got much use for me, but I guess you ain't lettin' him get away with this?"

Dillon turned his head to look at her, and Gurney tossed the pepper in his face. Myra threw herself flat. Dillon gave a strangled scream and the gun exploded at his side. Gurney made a dive for the door. He wanted to get the Thompson. He blundered into Dillon's room. It was dark in there, lit only by a flickering candle. He couldn't see the Thompson anywhere. He swore as he rushed round the room, feverishly turning things over, pulling out drawers, and groping in dark corners. Every moment he expected to feel the cold barrel of the gun, and his terror grew as his questing hands found nothing.

There was a fearful commotion of Dillon's screams and the gun going off outside. Gurney, sobbing with panic, ran back to the door again. He almost ran into Dillon, who was stumbling across the outer room, one hand over his eyes, the other holding the gun waist-high. Gurney ducked back, hastily squeezing himself behind the door. Dillon fired once. The bullet sent a spurt of splinters from the wall. He came into the room and stood listening.

Gurney held his breath. He was scared all right. Dillon groped his way across to the bed. Gurney let him go past, then he leapt forward, driving his knees into Dillon's back. The two went down with a crash. Gurney screamed for Myra to come.

The gun shot out of Dillon's hand and slid under the bed. Gurney could feel the heat from Dillon's body. They were both sweating with fear.

Arching his back, Dillon shot Gurney over his head, and then grabbed him round the body. He hit Gurney twice with his fists, as if he were driving a nail into wood. They both caught Gurney on the chest, driving the wind out of his body. Gurney lashed out with his feet, but in his terror he kicked wild. Dillon came at him again, his lips off his teeth, and a horrible sobbing noise coming deep down from his chest. Gurney took another punch that made him jerk convulsively, and then he slammed his right into Dillon's face.

Myra came running in. She stood in the doorway, the knife held before her, waiting for a chance to get at Dillon. The two men rolled over, away from her, into a dark corner. She sprang forward and caught up the candle, holding it above her head.

“Kill him, Nick!” she shrilled. “Get after him . . . don’t let him get away!”

Gurney made a desperate effort to break away from Dillon, but Dillon was too strong for him. They crashed against the wall. One of Dillon’s hands groped for Gurney’s face, hooked fingers questing for his eyes. Gurney yelled and jerked his head back. Pinning Gurney with his knees, Dillon heaved up. Myra saw the broad shoulders suddenly coming up out of the shadow. She ran forward, holding the candle in her left hand, and drove the knife down hard.

The light warned Dillon. He let go of Gurney and threw himself backwards, crashing into Myra. The candle fell to the floor and went out. Myra went over heavily. The breath in her body rushed out of her throat as she hit the boards. She felt a hand close round her ankle. Screaming wildly, she kicked out furiously with her free foot. Twice she kicked Dillon’s head, but he kept on. He dragged her close and his hands gripped her thighs, his fingers like steel hooks, driving into the flesh and muscle. The agony of his grip made Myra scream again. She twisted forward, her fists beating him like flails. Still he kept that grip, digging his nails deeper and deeper into her.

“Nick . . . for God’s sake . . .!” Myra screamed.

Gurney heaved out of the darkness and smashed down on both of them. Myra got a hard knock from his arms as he came down. The paralysing grip on her legs loosened as, swearing in great gasping breaths, Dillon grabbed at Gurney again. Myra rolled clear. The cold blade of the knife touched her hand and she seized it by the handle.

Gurney yelled, “I got him . . . quick . . . Myra quick!”

She ran into the darkness towards the sound of the struggle. Her shins struck their bodies and she fell on top of them.

Gurney panted out of the darkness, “Get him . . . for Christ’s sake . . . I can’t . . . hold him.”

Myra kept her head. She lay flat on the two struggling bodies. Her hand groped in the dark and touched a face. The two men heaved up, nearly throwing her clear.

A muffled voice mumbled, “He’s underneath . . . get him.” And blindly she thrust down with the knife. She heard a sigh and the struggling suddenly ceased.

“Don’t leave him . . . Nick . . .” Myra gasped to Gurney. “Hold him.” Her hand still held the horn shaft of the knife; she pulled it out, and then, moving the point a little way up, she shoved down hard again on the handle.

She stabbed four times before she was satisfied. Then she rolled away and got shakily to her feet. There was a heavy silence in the darkness. She said uneasily. “You all right, “Nick?”

A burning, claw-like hand gripped her wrist, twisting it sharply, so that the knife fell with a little clatter on the boards. “You’ve killed him, you silly little cow,” Dillon said in her ear.

Myra screamed once. Then her body stiffened with terror. “Don’t touch me . . . don’t touch me!” she moaned, trying to free her wrist.

She heard Dillon’s foot touch the knife and kick it away. Then he let go of her and struck a match. With red, streaming eyes he looked at her in the dim flicker of the light.

“Stay still,” he said through his teeth. “You make a move an’ I’ll smash you.”

She remained motionless, one shaking hand at her mouth, while he walked stiffly to the lamp and lit it. Her eyes left him and turned slowly to Gurney, lying in the shadow. A narrow ribbon of blood ran from Gurney towards her, twisting like a snake across the rough boards. Still she could not move. The blood ran close to her feet, and she followed its course with eyes wide with horror.

Dillon pushed the door closed and mopped his eyes with his shirtsleeve. His chest still heaved a little, and his face was set in granite-like lines.

“You dumb little bitch,” he said, “what you thinks goin’ to happen to you now?”

Myra jerked her eyes from Gurney. She looked at him, suddenly sensing her danger. “He made me do it . . .” she began; “he made me —”

Dillon sneered. “That hick wouldn’t’ve started anythin’ like that. He ain’t got the guts. You put him up to it; ain’t that the way it went? You said ‘Kill him’, an’ the louse just went ahead. I got you lined up. You bashed Butch. You’re a little hellcat. Well, I guess you an’ me are goin’ to understand each other.”

He walked over to her slowly. She backed away, throwing out her hands and shaking her head at him in her terror.

“Don't kill me . . .” she implored. “Don't . . . do . . . it! . . .” Her voice went shrill.

He reached out and grabbed her wrist, jerking her close. His inflamed eyes made her shrink back. “I've changed my mind about you,” he said. “You've got what it takes, so I guess you can string along with me. I always could use a broad like you. When I pick a moll she's got to be tough, an' I reckon that goes for you. Now do you get it? You an' me are goin' to work together. You're doin' what I tell you. I'm the boss, an' you're yessing your goddam guts out.”

Myra said quickly, “I'll do anythin'.”

Dillon took her arm and led her out of the room. She went with him, keeping her eyes from the still body that had now ceased to bleed. Dillon took her into her room again. He said quietly, “Wait here.” He went out, leaving her standing shivering by the bed. There was something terrifying in his cold, ruthless face. She just stood, her hands hanging at her sides, and her eyes blank.

Dillon came back again. He brought with him the thin steel rod they used to clear the stove. Myra looked at it and then suddenly came to life. Her hands shot up to her face. “What are you doin' with that?” she gasped, pushing herself against the wall, as if trying to force her body through the plaster.

“You gotta learn some sense, ain't you?” Dillon said, moving softly towards her. “I guess a good bashin' with this will get your ideas workin' right.”

Myra screamed, “Don't! . . . Don't! . . . Don't! . . .”

Dillon shifted his feet a little, then swung his fist. He hit her in her mouth, banging her head back with a crash against the wall. Her eyes rolled up, and she went down. Dillon kicked her over on her face, then, putting his boot on her neck, pinning her to the floor, he slashed down at her with the rod.

Off Bunker Avenue, within smelling distance of the Kansas City Stockyards, Miss Benbow ran a dress shop. It was the kind of shop you'd go to if your last nickel was a phoney, and you were anxious to have some excuse to scratch yourself.

Miss Benbow was a big negress. She'd got a smile like a split pumpkin, and if you looked hard enough at her when she pulled that grin you'd see it never reached her eyes. She made a lot of money, but not from the shop. If you asked her when her last sale had been she couldn't've told you. Her memory wasn't that long.

At the back of the shop, up a flight of dirty narrow stairs, she ran a flophouse. At one time or another she had given guys like Karpis, or Barker or Frank Nash, a shakedown while the cops were looking for them. Miss Benbow was safe. The cops left her alone. Some said she'd got a hold on the Police Commissioner. Anyway, the police let her alone, and that was good enough.

The two, Myra and Dillon, came to Miss Benbow at sight. The rain fell lightly on the glistening pavements, and the soft mist from the river was for the moment washed away. They came out of the night, Dillon walking softly, looking over his shoulder suspiciously from time to time. He was conscious of his new clothes, and the weight of the Thompson lying at the bottom of his big grip. :

Myra stepped down the wet flags, her wooden heels tapping their challenge. She held her head up, delighting in the soft caress of silk against her skin. Dillon had done things to her in a short time. For the first time in her life she knew what it meant to have a man around. She no longer had to urge or suggest. She was told what to do and she obeyed blindly.

She glanced at Dillon, seeing his powerful shoulders and his thick, muscular neck. A little flame flickered through her. She wanted him. She wanted him to take her brutally, to bruise her in the taking of her.

They had been two nights on the journey, moving cautiously forward towards Kansas City. She had spent two nights of sick disappointment with him. He had treated her coldly, sharing the same room with her, but not touching her.

Dillon disturbed her thoughts abruptly. "This is it," he said.

They stopped outside the dress shop. The place was in gloomy darkness.

“This joint is good,” Dillon said, speaking out of the side of his mouth. “All the boys come here.”

He located a bell push at the top of the door and pressed. They could hear the sharp whir somewhere at the back of the building. They waited there in the rain like statues.

Miss Benbow came and opened the shop door herself. She blocked the entrance with her great body. “My!” she said. “Ain’t you made a mistake?”

Dillon said distinctly, “It’s mighty hot round here. I guess it’s cooler inside.”

Miss Benbow looked at them suspiciously. “Where you from?” she snapped.

Dillon growled, “Suppose we come in an’ talk? I’m gettin’ wet.”

The negress hesitated, then stepped to one side. “Come in,” she said.

They stepped into the dark shop and waited in the darkness until Miss Benbow had shot the bolt, then she turned on the electric light, and they blinked at her.

“Now then,” she said suspiciously, “where you from?”

“Plattsburg,” Dillon said.

“Who sent you here?”

Dillon said softly, “You heard of a guy called Nelson?”

Miss Benbow nodded. “Sure,” she said, “I knew Nelson.”

Dillon pushed his hat back. “Okay: I toted a rod for Nelson. I’m Dillon.”

Miss Benbow moved uneasily. “I guess most of Nelson’s boys are dead,” she said.

“This one ain’t.” Dillon grinned mirthlessly. “We want a room an’ some grub.”

Miss Benbow hesitated, then she said, “Fifty bucks a day.”

Myra said, “For Gawd’s sake . . . this ain’t the Belmont Plaza.”

Dillon broke in sharply. "Shut up! We're floppin' in this joint . . . who's payin', anyway?"

"Let's see your money." Miss Benbow held out her hand. There was a cold look in her eyes.

Dillon grinned wolfishly. He pulled out his roll and let Miss Benbow feast her eyes on it. She drew her thick lips off her teeth. There was plenty of grease in that smile of hers. "Like the look of that?" he said.

Miss Benbow said, "You can have a room all right. I guess I want a week's rent now, mister." Her voice was well shot with oil.

Dillon stripped some notes off the roll and slung them on the table. Miss Benbow picked up the money and counted it carefully. Then she jerked her head. "I'll take you up," she said.

They followed her up a narrow stairway to a big landing that could have been a lot cleaner. There were four doors leading on to the landing. She plodded over to the farthest one and unlocked it.

"How's this?" she said.

The room was big. Two beds divided by a small table faced the window. The carpet was thick, and the chairs overstuffed. It looked good to Myra after Butch's shack.

"This'll do fine," she said.

Miss Benbow shot her a contemptuous look. Her eyes rolled inquiringly at Dillon.

"Yeah," Dillon said, dumping the suitcases down. "What about some chuck? My belly's flappin'."

Miss Benbow put another pound of grease in her smile. She could well afford to feed these two. "I'll send somethin' up right away," she said, "you bet."

When she had pulled the door to after her Myra shot a look at Dillon. "You're playin' a fancy hand, ain't you?" she said. "Fifty bucks a day! That's some dough."

"Pipe down," Dillon said coldly. He gave her a hard look. "Can't you use your head? This joint means a lot to me. I can meet the big shots here . . . I gotta hunch I can pull somethin' big . . . ain't that worth

payin' for?"

He tossed his fedora on a hook on the door and walked over to Myra. They looked at each other.

"I've been out of this game too long," he said, speaking very slowly, choosing his words. "I gotta get an in before I get goin'."

Myra put her hand on his sleeve. "You're goin' to be the biggest shot of them all." There was a soft yielding tone in her voice.

Dillon curled his lip. "Yeah?" he said. "Who says?"

Her face, no longer the face of an adult child, was hard with determination to the point of ruthlessness. "I say so. You're goin' to show all these little mobsters just where they get off. You're gonna think an' act big. No one must get in your way . . . you understand that? No one must get in your way." She spoke slowly, emphasizing every word.

Dillon reached out and gripped her arms. His steel-like fingers bit into her muscles and she suddenly went weak inside for him. "You got it right the first time," he said. "And you're trailin' along right behind me." He paused, then went on, "Thought of the cops?"

She laughed at him. "What did Nelson do with the cops? He'd enough dough to straighten things. Didn't he get protection? Okay, that's what you're goin' to get."

Dillon shook his head wisely. "Sure he got protection—an' look at him now. They dug twenty-four slugs outta that guy when they put him on the slab."

"G-men," Myra said tersely. "You ain't got any worry. You keep clear of the G-men an' you'll be okay."

Yeah I'll keep clear of the G-men." There was a hard note of menace in his voice.

A knock sounded on the door. They stiffened, then Dillon said crossly, "Relax, can't you?" He went over to the door and jerked it open.

A tall, thin girl, with heavily rouged cheeks, was standing there holding a large tray, covered with a cloth. "Miss Benbow sent this up." She had a nasal whine that put Myra's teeth on edge.

Dillon stood back and let her in. Myra looked her over. The girl glanced at Dillon wide-eyed, and put down the tray. She again looked at Dillon, a sly sidelong with a strong line of "come hither" in it. She went out, swinging her hips a little.

Dillon kicked the door shut. "I guess that street pushover thinks she's good," he said.

Myra took the cloth off the tray. "I guess dames don't mean much to you," she said, trying to keep her voice steady.

Dillon shrugged. "The reason why a dame don't mean a thing is because they toss it in your face. The way most of 'em carry on, you'd think it wore out."

Myra put her hands on the table and examined her nails.

She said, without looking up at him, "They could give a guy like you a pretty good time."

Dillon turned and stared at her. "That's what you think," he said, a faint sneer on his mouth. "I think different."

He sat down at the table and began to eat hungrily.

* * *

Across the landing, behind a locked door, Roxy was having breakfast. The Kansas City Times was propped up against the coffeepot, and he read it carefully as he ate.

Fanquist still lay in bed, her flaxen hair spread out on the pillow, a cigarette in her lips. She watched Roxy sleepily.

"A blue-nosed bishop is puttin' up a squawk about the number of unfortunate women he's been runnin' into lately on Main Street. Says it's a disgrace," Roxy announced with a grin. "What you think, Fan?"

"Search me," she said with a Southern drawl. "Maybe he forgot his dough, or maybe he's got beyond it."

Roxy shook his head. "Those guys never get beyond it," he said. "I guess he hadn't any dough. And listen to this, Fan; Some guy found his

wife two-timin' an' set about her with a meat cleaver. There's a picture of the guy here . . . wantta see it?"

Fanquist shook her head. "I don't like horrors . . . lay off it, will you?"

Roxy tossed the paper on the floor. He finished his coffee and lit a cigarette. "Got any ideas for today?" he asked hopefully.

"I'm havin' a fingerwave." Fanquist stretched her arms and yawned. "Ten o'clock. It'll take the best part of two hours . . . meet me for lunch?"

Roxy nodded. "Yeah, I'll do that," he said. "I'll pick you up at Verotti's."

A tap came at the door. Roxy looked over at Fanquist, his eyebrows raised. Then he put his hand inside his coat and loosened the gun in its holster. "Who is it?" he asked.

"It's okay," came Miss Benbow's hoarse whisper.

"What the hell does she want?" Roxy said, walking to the door and jerking it open.

Miss Benbow came in. Her white teeth glittered like piano keys. Roxy shut the door and turned the key again. "What's the trouble?" he asked, tossing the cigarette butt into the fireplace.

Miss Benbow nodded to Fanquist. "You've got neighbours," she said. "They're new . . . I ain't seen 'em before."

Roxy looked a little startled. "They okay?" he asked sharply.

"I guess so," Miss Benbow said. "They knew how to get in. He's called Dillon."

"Dillon? Why, that guy's been out of the game for a long time. You remember Dillon?" Roxy looked over at Fanquist.

"Sure, I remember hearin' of him. A mean guy. A guy who don't smoke or drink or have a girl is a mean guy."

Roxy grinned. "That's what you say."

Miss Benbow moved a little restlessly. "There's something about those two I don't like. The broad is just a kid, but she's bad. She's got a cold little face that I wouldn't like to wake up an' find on my pillow. The

guy's big an' tough. He makes me uneasy."

Fanquist looked interested. "This guy, is he handsome?"

Roxy laughed. "You oughtta have a cold bath, Fan," he said. "Ain't she a hot momma?"—to Miss Benbow.

Miss Benbow grinned some more. "I like to see it," she said. "There're too many cold-blooded broads around to please me."

Fanquist pouted. "Come on, you big lump," she said. "Don't keep a girl waitin'. What's he like?"

Miss Benbow nodded her head. "Sure, sure," she said. "He's got it all. Dressy kind of a guy. Big, strong and hard. Good in bed, he'd be."

Fanquist looked over at Roxy. "Ain't you jealous?" she asked.

Roxy grinned. "Sure I am . . . I'm burnin' up."

"I'd leave that guy alone," Miss Benbow cautioned. "That little bag don't look like she'd stand for much interference."

Fanquist shrugged. "Aw! To hell with her," she said. Then, glancing at the clock, she dragged off the bedclothes. "My Gawd!" she said. "I gotta get my hair fixed at ten."

Miss Benbow moved to the door. "I figgered you'd like to hear about those two," she said.

Roxy nodded. "I'll look 'em over."

He sat down in the overstuffed chair and watched Fanquist dress. "You ain't in such a goddam hurry you can't wash," he said, when she started to pull her clothes on.

She took no notice. She adjusted the straps of her hold-up. Roxy looked with raised, eyebrows. "You be careful," he said. "Some guy's going to trip over your chest one of these days."

Fanquist giggled. "The things you say," she said, doing things to her face.

Roxy switched his mind. "I guess I'll take a gander at those two," he said, picking his teeth with a match-end. "Maybe they'll be interestin'."

“Watch yourself with the broad,” Fanquist warned him. “I’ll hook her eyes out if she starts on you.”

“Okay,” Roxy waved his hand. “You know me. I ain’t got the strength to take on two dames at once. You watch Dillon.”

She paused at the door. “Say, if these two ain’t dumb, bring ‘em along to Verotti’s. They might amuse me.”

Roxy nodded. “Yeah,” he said, “if they are bright I’ll do that.”

Fanquist shut the door behind her and ran downstairs. Roxy picked up the paper again and studied the police news.

Roxy was a heistman. He wasn’t very spectacular, but he made a nice living on the side. He specialized in car hold-ups. Gangdom considered him smart, and they had a certain respect for him. He had kept clear of the cops, he’d never been mugged or fingerprinted, and he wasn’t a killer. His stick-ups brought him in on the average a grand a week, and he was doing pretty well for himself.

Fanquist helped towards the weekly contribution by dipping pockets. She seldom came back without a piece of jewellery or a pocketbook in her bag.

Roxy and Fanquist had teamed up about eighteen months ago. They liked each other well enough, but there was no real affection there. Fanquist thought he was a bit of a wop, and Roxy considered she was a little tramp. They kept their opinions to themselves and broke no bones. They slept together as a matter of physical convenience, and they ate together for company. They shared a room for economy, and they got on pretty well.

When Roxy had finished the newspaper he got up, put on a black fedora, looked himself over in the long wall-mirror, and sauntered on to the landing. He took a packet of gum from his pocket and peeled off the wrapper, then he put the gum in his mouth and clamped on it thoughtfully. All the time he did this he was listening.

He knew it would be dangerous to tap on the door; he remembered hearing things about Dillon. He’d seen a guy take some hot lead through his belly, just tapping on doors. He leant up against the doorway and waited, hoping someone would come out. He waited some little time, then he shrugged his shoulders. He went back to his room, leaving his door open.

The big Spanish guitar gave him an idea. He reached over and began playing. He went right into the Prologue of Pagliacci. Roxy had a smooth voice; a nice rich tenor. With the Prologue he knew he was good. He could reach the E Flat and he could swell up on it until the windows rattled. He liked tossing this high stuff off, but Fanquist wouldn't stand for it.

He guessed no dame would remain long behind a door with this hot Italian stuff going on, and he was right. Myra put her head round the door and came out.

Roxy wallowed in the sobs, made himself miserable with the last bars, then closed down hurriedly with a few showy chords.

He grinned at Myra. "I bet you thought it was a catfight."

She stood looking at him admiringly. "Say, that was swell," she said.

"You like it?" He tried to look surprised. "That's just classic stuff. Wantta hear me do 'Stormy River'?"

She nodded, her hands clasped in front of her. Roxy thought she was easy on the eye. Her figure was subtle, not like Fanquist's curves that reached out and tried to snap at you. Her big eyes made Roxy glad that she couldn't read his mind. He ran his fingers over the strings. Roxy could certainly handle that guitar.

Out came Dillon. His face was cold and suspicious. Roxy nodded to him, but kept on playing, then he began to sing. It wasn't for nothing he had listened to every record Bing Crosby had ever made. Roxy hadn't enjoyed himself so much for years.

He finished off with a real tricky ending, and put the guitar down on the couch. "Come on in," he said: "I guess I owe you two a drink."

Myra walked in quite at ease. She sat down on the arm of the couch and looked round the room. Dillon leant against the doorway. He watched Roxy closely.

Myra thought Roxy looked like George Raft. She liked him. He didn't strike her as being a big shot, but she thought he'd do to be getting on with.

Roxy fixed three highballs and passed them round. Dillon put his glass on the table, shaking his head.

Roxy raised his eyebrows. "What's wrong with it?"

Dillon said sourly, "I don't use it."

Myra said, "Come on in an' shut the door—there's a draught."

Dillon came in and shut the door. There was a second's silence. Then Myra and Roxy started to speak. They looked at each other and laughed. "I'm Myra . . . this is Dillon," she said.

Roxy nodded. "I'm pleased to know you both. I guess you two wouldn't be here if you weren't in the game."

Dillon said coldly, "What's your racket?"

Roxy took a pull at his glass. He glanced at Myra. "I'm known as Roxy around here," he said. "Maybe we'd better get more acquainted before we get down to rackets."

Dillon shrugged. "That don't suit me," he said. "You may act dumb, but I bet you know who I am, so I guess a little info from you might ease things."

Roxy tipped his hat over his eyes. This guy had a mean look, he thought. He tried to remember some of the things he had heard about him. It was too long ago. He could only remember he was a killer.

"Sure," he said at last, "I know you. I guess I'm just in a small way. My line's stickin' up cars. I make a little dough now an' then. My girl's a dip."

A sneer went across Dillon's face. Real smalltime stuff, he thought. "I gotta get back into the racket," he said. "I've been out too long."

Roxy went over and lay on the couch. He studied his clothtop boots. He had very small neat feet, and he liked to admire them. "Yeah," he said, "I guess you're forgotten."

Dillon flashed a look at Myra—signalling her to be quiet. He said, "I wantta contact someone big."

"I like you two," Roxy said thoughtfully, "so I'll deal it off the top deck. You don't stand a chance 'musclin' in on anything big in this burg until you got yourself a reputation again. The old mobs are washed up and the new crowd just think there's no one who can show 'em anythin'. You try to horn in there an' you're goin' to run into

plenty of grief.”

Myra said in a quiet voice, “Well, that's talkin'.”

Roxy looked up and grinned. “Sure, that's the way it is, sister. You gotta go slow, see? I can give you an openin' here and there. I'd be glad to, but you gotta build your set-up slow.”

Dillon said, “We're as good as the rest of the punks in this dump.” The cold light in his eyes escaped Roxy.

Roxy rambled on: “You ain't met the big shots yet,” he said. “I've been in the racket for ten years, an' I'm glad not to know them, see? The big shots stick out, an' they're the first to get their ears slapped down. You gotta get protection, an' you've gotta pay for it, if you're a big shot. You get G-heat smeared over you. Look at Floyd an' Bailey an' Nash or any of 'em, They're on the nun an' they'll keep on the run. I ain't got anythin' to worry about, I'm smart.” Again he missed the look in Dillon's eyes.

The telephone whirred suddenly, startling them. Roxy got off the couch and took the receiver off the cradle. A husky voice came over the wire. “There're a couple of hard-lookin' guys casin' the street. I guess they're Feds. They're headin' your way.”

Roxy said, “Thanks, pal,” and put the receiver back. He looked at the other two. “You better park your rods,” he said quietly. “A couple of Federal dicks are on their way up.”

Dillon got to his feet quickly and silently. “They got nothin' on me,” he said.

Roxy pulled his coat away from his shoulder holster and undid the buckle. He slipped off the harness. “If you got a rod, you better park it,” he said; “these guys get tough if they catch you toting a gun.”

Myra said in a little flurry of panic, “Where can we hide them?”

Roxy walked over to the fireplace and knelt down. He pushed the tiled hearth back like a drawer and dropped his gun into the narrow hollow beneath. “The old girl's got this in every room. Use it.”

Dillon left the room and went to his apartment. He collected his two guns and the Thompson and stowed them away. He came back silently. “What's the idea?” he snarled. “I thought this place was okay?”

Roxy nodded. "Sure it's okay. You can't keep the Feds outta any place. The bulls leave it alone, but not the Feds. You ain't wanted by no G-man, are you?" There was sharp anxiety in his voice.

Dillon didn't say anything. He stood by the table, a little tense. With eyes like chips of ice he stared at Roxy. The expression in his eyes quite startled Roxy.

Myra broke in. "I guess not," she said.

Roxy relaxed. "Okay, just you go on drinkin' an' say nothin'. I'll do the talkin' if there's any talkin' to be done."

"Hell!" Dillon said savagely. "That black cow's goin' to lose some of her rent. She's nuts thinkin' I'm payin' all that dough, when the Feds can come in here."

Roxy nodded his head. "Sure," he said. "I guess she's been stringin' you along. You fix her. It's been comin' to her for a long time."

Suddenly they heard a commotion going on downstairs. They stiffened involuntarily. "Here they come," Roxy said, putting his feet up on the couch. "Now don't let those guys stampede you. They'll try all right."

They could hear Miss Benbow protesting on the stairs. They, heard her say, "You dicks ain't got anythin' on me. You can't come bustin' in like this. I tell you this is a respectable house."

Someone said in a gritty voice. "Take it easy, Coon, we're just lookin' the place over."

A heavy step sounded outside then the door was kicked open. The three in the room turned their heads and looked. Dillon was cool, but Myra's nerves were jumpy. Two big men stood in the doorway, their eyes watchful. Dillon thought they looked a couple of real tough birds.

"Hello, boys," Roxy said from the couch. He kept his hands in his lap. "I guess you ain't lookin' for me?"

One of them wandered into the room, leaving the other by the door. He said. "Get up when you talk to me."

Roxy got up quickly and took off his hat. He looked hard at the Federal and grinned a little uneasily. "Why, if it ain't Mr. Strawn," he said. "Ain't seen you for a long time."

Strawn went over to him and patted his pockets. "Where's your rod?" he asked.

Roxy shrugged his shoulders. "You got me wrong," he said. "I don't tote a rod. You know me, boss; I wouldn't do a thing like that."

Strawn said, "That line don't get you nowhere, so lay off it."

He looked at Dillon. Then he glanced over to the other dick. "Seen this monkey before?" he asked.

The other dick shook his head.

Strawn walked over to Dillon. "Who're you an' what you doin' around here?"

Dillon looked at him impassively. "Just havin' a drink with a pal of mine," he said. "What's wrong with that?"

Strawn looked him over, his face hardening. "Where you from?" he snapped.

Dillon shot a look at Myra. Strawn swung his fist. He smacked Dillon on the jaw. Dillon was off balance—he went over with a thud.

Roxy yelled, "Don't start anything!" His eyes were popping.

Dillon looked up at Strawn, his eyes black with hate. He came slowly to his feet, rubbing his jaw with his hand. Beyond the look in his eyes he remained impulsive.

Strawn said, "Listen, you melon-headed monkey, when I ask you somethin' you answer quick Where are you from an' what's your name?"

The other dick looked bored, but he had got a gun in his hand.

Dillon said between his teeth, "I'm from Plattsville. Name's Gurney . . . Nick Gurney."

Myra stood very still. She put her hand to her mouth.

"Just a big farmer's hick, huh?" Strawn sneered. "Well, listen, hayseed, you better keep outta this town. We don't like punks like you. You better go right back to Plattsville an' stay there. Do you get it?"

Dillon just stood there hating him with his eyes. Strawn clenched his

fists. "Answer me, will you? By heck! You get snotty with me, you goddam bohunk, an' I'll tear your guts out an' beat you to death with 'em!"

Dillon said, "I get you."

Strawn looked Myra over. "Well, sister, an' who're you?" he asked, eyeing her thoughtfully.

"I'm his wife," Myra said quietly. She put a lot of personality into her look.

Strawn shook his head. "This ain't no place for a kid like you to be in. You better get out an' go home. You'll lose a lotta time goin' round with a bum like this." He jerked his head at Dillon. "Forget him, an', go home to your Ma."

Myra lowered her eyes. She thought, "The big dumb-mouthing bastard.

Strawn shrugged. "Okay, watch yourselves, you three." He stepped outside the door and pulled it shut. He said in a low voice to the other dick, "We'll watch that Gurney, he's a bad guy."

Roxy held his hand up for silence. They sat there staring at the door, listening. It was only when they heard them go downstairs that they relaxed.

Dillon said evenly, "Some day I'll fix that heel. By God! He's got it comin' to him!"

* * *

Verotti's was a dive off Twenty-second Street, near the Union Station. Fanquist had a table in the corner. She was drinking a rye highball.

When Roxy came in with Dillon and Myra she waved excitedly to them. Roxy came up to the table and waved his hand. "This is Myra and Dillon," he said. "They've got a room across the way."

Fanquist had eyes only for Dillon. "What a hot-looking man!" she said. "Am I pleased to meet you, or am I?"

Myra's face was cold. She sat down next to Fanquist, trapping her

against the wall. Dillon sat opposite, with Roxy at his side.

Myra said, "It's grand to run into a guy like Roxy. He's been a real pal."

Fanquist shot her a quick look. "Say," she said, swiveling round so that she faced Myra, "what are you doin' away from your Ma? Hey, hot man, you're baby-snatching. That ain't right."

Myra's eyes glinted. "Don't embarrass him," she cut in quickly. "He likes 'em young. This guy ain't got time for broads who've got the grass worn off . . . you ask him."

Fanquist leant against the wall. "Smart kid, huh?" she said, two bright red spots on her cheeks. "Grass worn off, huh? That's a nice crack from a kid."

Myra turned her head. "Don't we do anythin' around here but talk?"

A waiter shuffled up and they ordered drinks. Roxy sat with his hat over his eyes, grinning to himself. Nothing pleased him more than to listenin to two women clawing each other.

Fanquist leant over the table towards Dillon. "I bet you know some hot spots in this town," she said.

From where he sat Dillon could look down the neck of her dress. He lifted his eyes and gave his hard stare. Fanquist suddenly felt a little cold. She sat back hurriedly.

Dillon said, "We thought maybe we might see some of em. We've just blown in."

Roxy said, "That guy over there's Hurst."

They looked across at a table in the middle of the room. A big blond man was drinking by himself. He wore his neat dark suit well. There was an air of money and importance about him.

Dillon said, "Who's Hurst?"

Fanquist laughed. "You do say things!" she said. "That guy's tops just now. He runs most of the big rackets round here."

"That so?" Dillon looked Hurst over again. "A big shot, huh?"

Roxy nodded. "Yeah, he's a big shot all right."

Myra said, "Maybe you know him?"

Roxy looked blank. "Hey!" he said. "What you think? I said this guy was a big shot. He don't mix with guys like you an' me."

Fanquist said in her slow drawl, "Maybe the kid fancies her chance."

Myra said, "Why not? He's just a guy, ain't he?"

Fanquist sneered. "Hurst don't play with kids," she said. "When that guy takes a woman he takes a woman."

Myra pushed back her chair. "I'll show you how I take a guy like that," she said.

Roxy said quickly, "Don't you start anythin' like that. Hurst's a tough bird. He don't like stunts like that."

Myra paused. "I'm interested in that guy," she said.

"You're interested because he's got somewhere. But the trouble with those guys is they don't stay that way long."

"No?"

"No. Hurst won't stay much longer. He's been in the racket too long."

Myra took a sip from her glass. Her eyes were cloudy. "He looks big enough to take care of himself," she said.

Roxy shook his head. "You wait an' see. Little Ernie's gunnin' for him. An' Little Ernie'll get him all right."

Myra moved restlessly. "Maybe he'll get Little Ernie first," she suggested.

"You ain't got the lowdown to this burg." Roxy spun his glass between his finger and thumb. "Hurst runs the Automatic racket. He's been makin' a pile of dough for some time. Little Ernie runs the Cat shops. He's in a big way too. That's the set-up. For years these guys ain't overlapped. They've made their pile outta their rackets an' kept to their side of the town. These guys are never contented, see? Maybe they pick up a couple of million bucks a year. Good money? Not to these guys. They want more. They've got big overheads. They've got a long list of retainers to pay off. So they always want more."

Myra said softly, "A couple of million bucks?"

Roxy nodded. "Sure, that ain't so much to guys like that," he said. "Hurst is startin' somethin'. He's expandin'. He's pushin' into Little Ernie's territory. That wop won't stand for that. Hurst says it's okay. Automatics can't hurt Little Ernie's Cat «hops. So he pushes ahead." Roxy shrugged. "One day, mighty soon, Hurst's goin' to get a handful of slugs tossed into his guts. Then his million bucks ain't goin' to mean a thing."

Myra lit a cigarette. "Maybe he'll get the wop first," she said.

"Yeah, maybe he will."

Fanquist said, "So you ain't taking Hurst after all?"

Myra shook her head. "I'll take him a little later on," she said.

Fanquist got up. "I guess we'd better get goin'," she said to Roxy. "I gotta job of work to do."

Roxy pushed his chair away and nodded Jo Myra. "We'll be seein' you."

Fanquist turned to Dillon and gave him one of her 'anytime-you-say-so' smiles.

"Bye, big boy," she said. "Don't let this babe get too many big ideas."

Dillon grunted.

Myra watched them go. "That little curdle-puss thinks she's smart," she said furiously. "She'd better keep her claws off you."

Dillon sat back. "You've got a lot to worry about, ain't you?" he sneered.

Hurst snapped his fingers, calling the waiter. He paid his check and got up. Myra watched him walk across the room and go into the street. Two tough-looking birds, sitting by the door, got up and followed him. Through the doorway she saw them get into a big powerful car and drive off.

Dillon said, "That guy might get me somewhere."

Myra said softly, "You don't need guys like that. You can get sky-high playin' solo."

"Yeah?" Dillon sneered. "Suppose you get wise to yourself. We ain't

nobody here. Look how that Federal dick shoved me around. Think we're goin' to get anywhere without an in? Not a chance. You keep your trap shut an' let me do the thinkin'. When I run outta ideas I'll give you a buzz. An' believe me, it'll take a long time before I'm screwy enough to take ideas from a dope like you."

Myra flushed. Her eyes grew stormy, but she didn't start anything. She said, "Maybe a smart liedown like that Fanquist moll could give you ideas."

Dillon stared at her. "Your mind runs on one track," he said. "She don't cut meat with me. You dames are all alike, ain't you? There's nothin' new about you, is there? I've seen it all before . . . so what the hell?"

Myra thought savagely, "I'll get under his skin one day. I'll fix him."

Dillon got up. "I'm takin' some air," he said. "This line of talk gives me a pain in my tail."

She followed him into the street. The sun was hot, and they walked along, keeping in the shade.

Dillon said, "I gotta get me a car—I guess I'll get it now."

"A car?" Myra was startled. "Where's the dough comin' from?"

"Suppose you keep your mind on your bed and your nose outta this?" Dillon snarled at her.

Off the main street they found a large garage with a dilapidated showroom, full of second-hand cars. A tall, thin guy, with a bobbing Adam's apple, came out and nodded to them.

"I'm pleased to meet you," he said. "Mabley's the name, an' if you're lookin' for a good bus you've come to the right joint."

Dillon said, "We're lookin', brother, but maybe we won't buy, then, maybe, if we find somethin' good an' cheap, we will."

Mabley put his thumbs in his trousers pockets and raised himself on his toes. "That's fair enough, mister," he said. "You look around." He leant up against the wall and watched them.

Dillon spotted the car right away. It was a big, shabby-looking Packard standing in a corner by itself. It was the only car of the lot

that looked as if it could hit a wall at sixty and not dent its fenders.

He didn't go over to it at once, but made a pretence of looking at the others first. Myra followed him around, not saying anything. She left it to him. At last he walked over to the Packard and examined it carefully. He opened the door and got in. The springs were good.

Mabley came over and dusted off the hood with a flick here and there. "You like this one, I bet," he said.

Dillon got out of the car and leant against the fender. "Maybe we could use it."

Mabley opened his eyes wide. "Listen," he said earnestly, "that car's got guts. There's plenty under that hood. Suppose you come for a run an' see?"

Dillon nodded. "Sure," he said, "I don't mind givin' you a break if it will hold together."

Mabley ran his hands through his hair. "If it will hold together . . . you'll see."

Dillon got under the wheel. "I guess I'll drive," he said.

The Packard was good. Dillon knew it would be. Out on a good stretch of road he worked it up to eighty-five. It held the road without a roll, and he guessed with a little tuning he could squeeze some more speed out of it.

They drove back to the garage in silence. Mabley was smug with certainty. When Dillon nailed the Packard, and they got out, Mabley said, "Didn't I tell you? . . . That bus can move."

Dillon said, "You're right. She's a bit too fast, if anythin'."

Mabley raised his hands. "Gawd!" he groaned. "Ain't you ever happy?"

Dillon broke in, "Now, come on, we ain't got all day. How much?"

Mabley leant against the fender. "Two thousand bucks, an' it's cheap at the price," he said.

Dillon stared at Myra. "Did you hear him?" he gasped. "Two thousand bucks for that old heap?"

He turned to Mabley. "We don't want your garage, we want the car, see?"

Mabley shrugged. "I tell you it's cheap," he said firmly.

Dillon said, "That old can ain't worth more'n eight hundred bucks, an' you know it."

Mabley said, "Two thousand."

Myra shrugged. "Let's go," she said. "This guy's crazy."

"Maybe he doesn't know his game right. Listen, I'll stretch a point an' buy it from you for a grand."

Mabley shook his head. "No use to me, mister. It's givin' it away at two."

Myra wandered away. "Come on, you can see he won't be reasonable."

Dillon said, "You're right. I guess we'll leave it." He walked over to where Myra was pretending to examine another car.

Mabley hesitated. "Well, seein' you're sold on this bus, I'll let you have it for nineteen hundred. That's rock bottom."

Dillon took Myra's arm and walked her to the door. "These smalltime traders are nuts," he said. "Nineteen hundred! What a crack!"

Mabley came after them. "Wait a minute. Don't you be in such a hurry."

Dillon said, "Forget it. We ain't interested no more."

Myra cut in sharply, "Fourteen hundred. That's flat."

Dillon shot her a hard look, but didn't say anything. Mabley scratched his head. "I'll split the difference. I'm cuttin' my own throat, but I guess business is busted to hell these days."

Dillon wanted that car. He nodded. "Sixteen hundred if you fill the tank an' oil her."

Mabley looked at him. "You sure are a hard guy," he said. "But I'll do it."

"Get her ready in an hour," Dillon said sharply. "We'll be back."

They walked out of the garage. Myra started a moan. "This is goin' to knock a hole in our dough."

Dillon said, "Where do you get this 'our' stuff? We're fillin' the hole up again tonight, so what do you care?"

* * *

The Conoco Service station at Bonner Springs was floodlit at night. Two tired attendants relaxed in the office, their ears unconsciously cocked for the sound of a car, ready to snap to attention and come out at a run.

George, a fair-haired boy, thought of his girlfriend. When he wasn't busy his mind dwelt on her, when it wasn't dwelling on how he could make more money. George was a simple hick. He was like thousands of other guys. Two things came uppermost, his girl and money.

Hank, his fellow attendant, lolled across the table. "What's bitin' you, pal?" he asked. "You been lookin' like a bad dream for a couple hours."

George heaved a sigh. "Say, you know Edie . . . What you think's the matter with her?"

Hank scratched his head. "How the hell should I know what's the matter with her?" he said impatiently. "She ain't wearin' the bustle wrong?"

George shook his head. "Not a chance," he said gloomily. "Maybe we'd get married if it was like that."

"Then what's biting you?"

"She keeps away from me now . . . she's cooled off. Now what you think's come over her?"

Hank said with a sudden rush of inspiration, "Suppose you try this soap they're always croakin' about."

George scowled. "Don't you start to rib me," he said coldly. "I guess it's the dough that's the trouble. Edie was always keen to have dough. I ain't had a raise for two years now. I guess that's what's makin' her

sore."

Hank said, "It'd be nice to own a joint like this, wouldn't it?" He wandered over to the cash register and rang up "No Sale". He peered into the drawer, poking the money round with his finger. "I figger we take five hundred bucks a day here."

"There's more'n that in the can," George said. "We had a few odd bills settled today."

"You think it out. I guess a joint like this would be mighty nice to own."

George nodded. "You're right," he said.

Outside, a car pulled up. The two jumped to their feet and ran out. The big shabby Packard was parked near the gas pumps.

Dillon got out. "Any more of you guys inside?" he asked.

The two looked at him in surprise. "Just the two of us," George said. "We'll take care of the bus all right."

Dillon raised his hands a little. He was holding the two guns. "Grab some air," he said viciously, "and get inside."

The two attendants raised their hands. George went a little wobbly at the knees. He said, "Don't let that gun off, mister."

"Get inside!" Dillon snapped. "Jump to it!" He backed them into the office. "Stand over there by the wall, and keep your traps shut."

Myra came in and went over to the register. She rang it open and began scooping the money into a small bag. "Watch closely, boys," she said. "You're seein' history bein' made."

Dillon said, "Much there?"

Myra nodded. "It's worth while." She went through the two drawers and then slammed them to. "Maybe they've got a can round here."

Dillon said, "Where's the safe?"

Hank nodded miserably. "It's behind the desk," he said.

"Okay, get it open."

George unlocked the battered safe, and Myra walked over and peered inside. She scooped up a small wad of notes, pulled two or three ledgers out of the way, and glanced behind them. She straightened up. "That's the lot," she said.

Dillon went round to the telephone and jerked it away from its cable. "I don't want you boys to start yellin' just yet. We wantta get home safe, see?" He was feeling mighty pleased.

Myra looked them over. "I guess this is your first stick-up?" she said.

George mumbled, "Sure."

"You're havin' the breaks." She took a cigarette from her handbag and paused to light it. "You're in swell company. Know who this is?" She jerked her head towards Dillon. "I bet you don't. That guy set fire to the middle west. He's the original twenty-five minute egg. There'll come a time when you'll tell your grandkids how you were stuck up by this guy. I sure envy you boys; you gotta story to blow."

Dillon said, "Get goin', you big-mouthed doll."

She walked over to the door and Dillon crowded her into the darkness outside. The two attendants stood against the wall, their hands held high.

The Packard shot away and ripped into the darkness. Dillon shoved his gun away. "Suppose you keep that trap of yours shut?" he said from the blackness.

"You ain't got to worry . . . I'm buildin' you up."

"If there's any buildin' up, I'm the guy to take care of that," Dillon returned.

Myra held the wheel. She didn't say anything. Her eyes were intent on the road. As the car lurched to the bends she let her body swing against Dillon. She could feel the hardness of him under his coat, and it sent a flicker through her that made her blood sing in her ears.

This guy was tough, she thought, but he was a man. He had muscles and sinews and she began to ache for contact with him. Dillon, suddenly sensing her physical feeling for him, moved away, leaning well into the corner of the seat. She went limp with her frustrated longing for him.

Back at the apartment, they mounted the stairs silently and shut their door. Myra flicked on the light, walking slowly into the centre of the room, pulling her hat off as she did so, shaking her hair free.

Dillon stood by the door, rubbing his chin. He felt a vague urge towards her, but he ignored it. That urge made him a little uneasy.

Myra emptied the sack on the table and turned the money over with her finger. "Ain't a great deal here," she said, "but it'll do to get on with."

Dillon came over and sat down. He counted the money and stacked the notes neatly before him. Myra stood behind him, watching him. When he had finished she reached out and put her hands on his shoulders. The heavy muscles of his back contracted under her touch. She felt the flicker of flame shoot through her again.

He got abruptly to his feet, throwing her hands away. "Cut it out!" he said savagely. "You keep your whore tricks for some other punk."

She moved towards him. "We can't go on like this," she said; "you can't share this room with me—"

Dillon reached out his fist and shoved her away. "You heard me," he said. She caught the unevenness of his voice. "Get into bed, an' shut up!"

She said softly, "Sure, I guess I was only thinkin' of you."

Dillon turned from her and went over to his bed. He sat down and began to pull off his shoes. Myra stood in the middle of the room and undressed. She took her time. She let each garment fall to the floor until she had nothing on. She stood like that, looking at Dillon, then she turned and got into bed.

For the first time since she had known him she knew that she had made an impression on him. She knew that he was aware of her and she was content to wait for him.

Early next morning they woke with a start. Someone was drumming on their door. Dillon shot out of bed, making a grab for his gun. For a moment Myra was startled and she made to follow him, then she relaxed back on the pillow.

Roxy called from the other side of the door, "It's me."

Swearing softly, Dillon opened the door.

“What the hell do you want?” he said. “You got me thinkin’ the bulls were here.”

Roxy eased his way into the room. He looked a little startled at the sight of Dillon’s gun. “I guess I’m sorry about that,” he said. “But you two seen the paper?” His eyes were popping a little.

Myra said from the bed, “Let me see.”

Roxy tossed the paper on to the bed. “Got a big write-up there,” he said. “I guess you two’ve started already.”

Dillon went over and took the paper from Myra. He read through the account coldly and then tossed the paper back to Myra. “What makes you think that was me?” he asked Roxy quietly.

Roxy didn’t like the look in his eyes. He said uneasily, “Why, I just guessed it. None of the mob round here talk big when they pull a job. I just figgered that maybe you had started a new line.”

Dillon walked over to the mirror and examined his beard in the glass. Both Myra and Roxy watched him. He turned his head, so that he could look at them. “It ain’t goin’ to be the last those rags are goin’ to print about me,” he said. “They’ll have plenty to print before I’m through.”

* * *

During the two weeks that followed Dillon pulled three more hold-ups. He purposely kept them small—a service station and two out-of-the-way stores. He made enough money to be sure of living well for the next few weeks.

Although they shared a room, he did not again give Myra any opportunity of expressing her feelings. He was cold and ruthless to her. She was there to do what he said, and nothing more. Myra was sure of herself. She accepted his indifference and waited. She knew now that he had feelings, and she knew that it was only a matter of time.

Acting on Roxy's suggestion, they moved out of Miss Benbow's and took a small apartment off Grand Avenue.

Roxy thought Strawn might get a line on Dillon. Strawn was no fool, and he was just aching to push someone around. Dillon, one day, would overstep the line and start shooting, Roxy reasoned, and Roxy was not going to be there when Strawn called with the wagon. He reasoned it out carefully with Dillon. "This guy Strawn likes gettin' tough. He ain't got anythin' on you, but that wouldn't stop him lookin' you up an' slappin' your ears down if he hadn't anything better to do. I guess you'd be a lot safer away from this joint."

Through Roxy's efforts they got another apartment. It had one big advantage of being near the Union Station and having two entrances, and consequently two exits. Also, Roxy pointed out, they were just a block away from the General Hospital, so what more could they want!

A week after they had moved in, Roxy surprised them by a late visit. It was just after eleven o'clock, and Dillon was sitting by the radio reading the newspaper. Myra was practising dance steps at the other end of the room. She broke off to let Roxy in. She had only to take one look at Roxy to see that he was seriously worried. "What's your grief?" she asked him sharply.

Dillon swung round in his chair and stared at him with his hard eyes.

Roxy wandered in and sat on the arm of a chair. He pushed his hat to the back of his head. "I gotta load on my mind," he said. "You know Hurst?"

Dillon said impatiently, "I know Hurst all right. What's the matter with him?"

"Little Ernie's crowd is after him. He's asked for it an' he's goin' to get it."

Dillon shrugged. "Why get low? You ain't got to worry about Hurst. Suppose they do iron him out?"

Roxy said, "You don't get it. If Hurst gets knocked there's goin' to be a hell of a stink. The cops'll crack down on everyone they can lay their hands on. Hurst pays 'em plenty, and it's sure goin' to make them mad to have a meal ticket like that shot to hell."

Myra said, "What do you mean, crack down?"

Roxy moved a little impatiently. "This guy's a big shot. The papers'll play it to the sky. The cops won't touch little Ernie . . . he's too big for 'em. They'll go after the small guys like us. They'll hang every goddam frame on us to make a pinch, get it? We'll be the mugs who'll get tossed in the can."

"You mean all this?" Myra asked.

"For God's sake, of course I mean it. There's only one thing to do an' that's to take a powder quick."

Dillon got up. His face was cold and set. "No bull's goin' to frame me," he said. "How the hell do you know they're after him?"

Roxy said, "I heard it from Archer, one of Ernie's boys. He took Fan out last night an' got a little plastered. Fan keeps her ears open; she kidded him along, an' he blew the set-up. They're fixin' him tonight."

Myra took a step forward. "Tonight?"

Roxy nodded. "Hurst's got a dame he's nuts about. She's the wife of some high pressure guy in the City. She's scared sick her old man'll get the lowdown on her two-timing. Right; she meets Hurst in an apartment every now an' then. Hurst is crazy enough to go there on his own. I guess he's scared his bodyguard might get talkin'; anyway, when he goes on these outings he goes alone. Ernie's been watching him for weeks, an' he's got this business taped. They're callin' on Hurst and they'll give it to him at the apartment."

Dillon sprang to his feet. "Get the Tommy," he said, his words tumbling out of his mouth. "We're certainly goin' to surprise those bums."

Myra stared at him. Roxy put in quickly, "You goin' to pull Hurst out of this?"

Dillon swung round. "Sure I'm goin' to pull him out of it. It's the chance I've been waitin' for. Listen, Roxy, you use your head. You ain't gettin' anywhere as a solo stick-up artist. You want to get in with Hurst. You come with us. We're gettin' in on the ground floor."

Roxy shook his head. "Yeah, it's a grand chance all right—for a swell funeral. Little Ernie's mob know how to handle a rod. I ain't riskin' my hide for a punk like Hurst."

"He's right," Myra said. "Forget it, can't you?"

Dillon went over and took the Thompson gun out of the cupboard. "Where's this guy meet the dame?" he asked.

"It's a corner place on Seventeenth and Central. Apartment 364." Roxy moved to the door. He seemed anxious to go. "I guess I'll be movin' along. Take my tip, pack your bags and scram. This burg ain't goin' to be too healthy after they've put this Hurst guy in a wooden overcoat."

Dillon waited until he had gone, then he wheeled round on Myra. "You're comin'," he snarled at her. "This is our big break. We let Hurst get knocked off an' the bulls'll either make a pinch or run us out. We go down there an' pull Hurst outta this jam an' he's goin' to take notice."

Myra shook her head. "Forget it," she said stubbornly. "If you think I'm goin' to stick my neck out an' get it sapped, you're crazy."

Dillon jerked up the Tommy. The thin barrel pointed directly at Myra. "Listen," he said evenly. "This is the chance I've been waitin' for. If you think I'm goin' to let a rotten-gutted monkey like you get in my way, you got another think comin'. You back out of this an' I'll make a sieve out of you. Get it? I can go into the street an' get some other punk who's got enough guts to work with me any goddam time I want to. So get this right, now and for keeps. You play ball the way I want it or else . . ."

The vicious look in his eyes made her mouth go dry. "You ain't got to get mad," she faltered. "I'll come. I didn't think you felt that way about it, that's all."

Dillon lowered the gun. "Maybe you'll get into your skull one of these days that when I tell you what to do you do it quick." His eyes were hard and suspicious.

Myra walked to the door, snatching up her hat and putting it on. "Come on," she said, "I'm ready."

In the car, Myra drove rapidly past the George Washington monument, past Union Station and into Main Street. She kept the car steady, threading her way through the traffic, but taking no risks. This was no time to get into an argument with a traffic cop. Dillon sat beside her, the Thompson between his knees, covered by his raincoat.

Myra said, "For God's sake don't wait for these guys to start anythin'. Blast 'em as soon as you see 'em." She eased the Packard past a tumbledown jaloopy, then went on, "Hurst'll see there ain't a murder

rap hangin' on to this."

Dillon said out of the darkness, "One of these days I'm goin' to shut that trap of yours for good. You talk too much."

Myra said nothing. Her lips tightened a little, but she kept her temper with an effort. She swung into Eighteenth and stopped the Packard at the corner of Eighteenth and Central Streets. She spilled out of the car quickly. Seventeenth was just a block ahead.

Keeping the Thompson under his coat, Dillon hurried after her. The apartment house was one of those discreet places with everything automatic and no attendants to check who came in or went out.

Myra went over to the row of mailboxes. She looked over her shoulder at Dillon. "It's on the fourth floor. Suppose we take the elevator to the third an' walk?"

Dillon said, "We walk from here."

Silently they mounted the stairs. On the third floor two tough-looking birds were lounging against the wall. They looked at Dillon hard, but the two kept on. Myra gave them just a casual glance. Dillon didn't even look at them, but he saw them all right. On the fourth floor no one was about.

A little breathless from the climb, Dillon said, "I guess those two guys are waiting for him down there."

"What are we goin' to do? Go back an' give it to 'em?"

Dillon shook his head. "Maybe we can tip Hurst off first," he said. "I'll go up the next set of stairs an' you ring up Hurst. If they come up I'll start somethin'. Mind you drop flat."

With her heart jumping a little, Myra watched him disappear round the bend of the staircase, then she walked over to the apartment door and rang the bell. Faintly she could hear the bell ringing. No one came.

She waited there impatiently and rang again. A faint sound behind her made her look round quickly. The two men had come up and were standing at the head of the stairs watching her. She kept her thumb on the bell and looked at them coolly.

One of them, a dark Jew, took two steps forward. "Get away from that

door, sister,” he said.

She said, “I don't know what you mean.” Her thumb dug the bell flat.

The Jew came over to her quickly and knocked her hand away. “If you squawk I'll kick your mug in,” he said softly.

Myra backed away a little until her shoulder touched the wall. She stood looking at the Jew, not saying anything.

The other guy moved a little round the bend of the staircase, sliding the gun from his holster.

Dillon, watching them through the banisters, couldn't start anything because of Myra.

The Jew said, “Who are you?”

The other guy broke in, “Where's the punk who came in with you?”

That startled the Jew, who had forgotten about Dillon. He jerked out a gun quickly.

Myra screamed, “Give it to them!” and flung herself flat.

Dillon squeezed on the trigger and the Thompson roared. He held the muzzle high. The stream of lead caught the two like a whiplash across their faces. Dillon gave them just a short burst, but it was enough.

The Jew stood for a moment, his hands groping out before him. The front of his face had disappeared, leaving just a horrible spongy mess on his shoulders. Myra caught her breath and turned her head quickly.

The Jew fell near her. His body twitched and jerked. The other guy curled up in a corner, the top of his head blown off.

Dillon came down the stairs like a cat. He stood looking at the two incuriously. “You all right?” he called to Myra. She got to her feet, keeping her eyes away from the two. Her face was pale, but her eyes glittered with suppressed rage.

“I rang an' rang,” she said, keeping her voice low. “An' that yellow rat inside didn't come. Those two might have killed me but for you.”

Dillon straightened a little. He went over and beat on the door with the butt of the Thompson. He made a lot of noise. “Open up!” he shouted. “The war's over.”

The door opened an inch or two, and the face of a terrified woman peered at him. She was dressed in an orange wrap, which she clutched tightly to her. Dillon could see her figure sharply outlined beneath the silk. Behind her, his face twitching with terror, stood Hurst. He was holding a heavy gun in his hand. His hair was standing stiffly and his complexion was a dirty muddy colour.

Dillon said, "We've just knocked off these two killers." He jerked his head to the two bodies. "They're Little Ernie's mob."

"Who are you?" the woman stammered.

"The name's Dillon—"

"Let him in for God's sake!" Hurst snarled. "We'll have the cops up here in a minute."

The woman said, "Come in."

Dillon walked into the apartment, followed by Myra, and the woman hastily closed the door.

Hurst covered Dillon with his gun. "Put that Thompson on the floor," he said.

Dillon stared at him, shrugged, and put the gun down. He walked a little way past Hurst.

"Come on," Hurst snapped. "What the hell's going on?"

Dillon said, "Little Ernie's gunnin' for you. He sent those two punks up here. I heard about it and came down quick. That's all."

Hurst hesitated, then he said, "Wait." He went over to the telephone and dialled. He stood there, the gun still menacing, waiting for his line to connect. They heard the faint "plop" as someone answered the ring at the other end. Hurst said, "McGovern? Listen, there's been a fight up here an' two of Ernie's boys have run into a lot of grief. Send a wagon an' pick 'em up. This has got to be covered up, see? Just come up quick and get these birds out of here. I'll be along an' do some talking later. I don't want your men asking questions here, do you get all that?" He listened for a moment and then hung up.

He put the gun on the table and lit a cigarette. Myra could see his hand was still shaking. He looked at the woman and jerked his head. "Get dressed quick," he said. "Maybe the newshounds'll start buzzin'."

The woman went into the other room and shut the door. Hurst pushed his fingers through his hair and looked at Dillon.

“What's the idea of butting in on my fight?”

Dillon showed his teeth in a mirthless smile. “I guess you ain't so good at lookin' after yourself. Anyway I figgered it's time you an' I got together.”

“You're the guy who's been stickin' up all those service stations, aren't you?” Hurst was watching him closely.

Dillon nodded his head. “Sure,” he said. “I'm figgering to get in with a mob like yours and doin' somethin' in a big way.”

Hurst stared at his fingernails, thinking. He looked up at last. “I guess we might talk this over some time,” he said. “Suppose you look me up tomorrow?”

Dillon said, “Sure, I'll do that.”

Hurst jerked his head to the other door. “I gotta get this girl out of here. I ain't got time to talk to you now. You've done a swell job . . . don't think I ain't mighty obliged.”

Dillon moved over to the front door. “I'll see you tomorrow,” he said. Myra followed him out.

Coming up the stairs with a rush were two cops. They waved their guns at Dillon. Hurst heard them and came out quickly.

“Let these two through here,” he said. “Those are the stiffs you gotta look after.” He pointed to the two bodies lying on the floor.

The cops stared at Dillon and Myra as they walked past them. Their looks were curious. They hadn't seen these two before.

Dillon kept the Thompson under his coat and walked quickly. He was glad to get into the street. In the car, on the way back, he said, “I guess we're movin' in the right direction. This Hurst bird will get us just where we wantta get . . . you see.”

Leaving the car in the basement garage, they groped their way upstairs to their apartment. Dillon went first. Halfway up, her heart beating hard, Myra made a deliberate false step. She stumbled up against Dillon.

He cursed as her weight struck him, and to save himself he twisted and caught at her. She felt his hard hands gripping her waist. The feel of his hands for the first time made her go limp. They stood in the dark like that, his hands digging into her flesh.

He said at last, "Can't you watch your feet?" He did not take his hands away, but shifted them a little so that they were just under her breasts.

She said nothing. His touch paralysed her. The fire that had burnt inside her for him blazed up so that she could only lean limply against him, willing him to stay there.

He suddenly took his hands away and took a step from her. "Come on up, for God's sake," he said thickly. "You goin' to stand there all night?"

They moved on again. He kept just one step ahead of her. She could feel the heat from his body, and she could hear his breath coming jerkily.

In the apartment he flicked on the light. She could see his face glistening, and a wild look she had not seen before in his eyes. She leant against the wall, her mouth a little slack, looking at him through half-closed eyes.

They stood facing each other, then without moving she said, "Now . . ."

Dillon passed his tongue over his lips. She could see the urge in him struggling with his caution. Moving forward, she passed close to him and sat on the bed. She put her hands behind her and leant back.

The blood slowly mounted to his face until it was congested. She saw his mouth twist and she dropped back, flat across the bed. He came towards her and, reaching out, he gripped the neckband of her dress, savagely ripping the flimsy stuff from her.

Triumphantly she received him, and gave herself to his ruthless and urgent possession.

part three

Outside, the rain beat on the windows. Below, the streets were empty and glistening in the yellow lights of the street lamps.

Myra paced the room restlessly, a cigarette in her mouth. No word from Dillon. She looked impatiently at the clock. Then she turned and, pulling back the curtain, looked into the empty street.

Her mind was alive with doubts. She went over to the telephone, lifted the receiver, hesitated, then put it back on its cradle. Where the hell was Dillon? she kept asking herself. He said he'd be there at nine o'clock; it was just after eleven.

She walked into her bedroom and switched on the tablelight. The room was well furnished, looking rather like a movie set. She stood looking round, seeing nothing.

Six months had gone by since the day they had got Hurst out of a jam. Six months of unrest and feverish activity. Hurst had paid them back for what they had done. Dillon was his right-hand man now. They were no longer petty gangsters. They were in the money now. Dillon's job was to see Hurst's racket ran smooth. He had a tough mob to work for him, while Hurst was content to sit in the background and collect the money as it rolled in.

Hurst's racket was this. He manufactured automatic machines of every description. He had gambling machines, moving picture machines of a doubtful kind, food machines, cigarette machines and even prophylactic machines. On the face of it, a good sound business. It was where he put the machines that made his game a racket.

His mob went round with a truck planting the machines on small shopkeepers, or hotels, apartment houses and suchlike. These people were forced to take them. Those foolish enough to resist were either beaten up or had their windows smashed. They got no rakeoff from the machines and Hurst had no overheads. He sent men round weekly to clear the money, and he made a big thing out of it. His gambling machines were foolproof. Foolproof for Hurst. A sucker simply could not win anything from them, but still they tried. Hurst had over six thousand automatic machines in operation.

It was Myra who suggested the schools. Hurst was nervous that there would be a row, but Myra had planned carefully. Nearly every school had a favourite candy shop, and it was in the candy shop that the automatic was planted. They put a smut movie automatic and a gambling automatic, and the kids flogged all their candy money in these machines. It brought in a new and pretty big revenue.

Dillon kept all the shopkeepers on the jump. He had to find fresh fields to plant the automatics, and he had to supervise the collecting of the money Hurst gave him a ten per cent cut on what he turned in.

It was not quite the big job Dillon had planned but it was bringing them in fifteen hundred dollars a week. Also, Dillon was running a mob, and it was a mighty tough mob at that.

Myra had money to burn. She kept away from Dillon's headquarters, and lived the life of a rich business man's wife.

For six months Dillon had been coming back each night around nine o'clock, and they would go out some place and eat. And now there was no sign of him'.

She wondered if he'd run into trouble. After his one attempt to get rid of Hurst, Little Ernie had sunk in the background. Myra began to think maybe Dillon had got himself knocked off in a gun fight.

The bell whirred suddenly, making her start round.

She ran to the front door. Roxy was standing there, his black fedora tilted over his eyes, and his hands in his pockets.

Myra said, "Why, Roxy!" She was pleased to see him.

"H'yah, baby." Roxy stood smiling at her. "Ain't seen you for a long time."

"Come right in." She stood aside to let him pass.

Roxy wandered in, his eyes roving round the room. He raised his eyebrows a little. "Swell joint you got here," he observed.

"Do you like it?" Myra led him over to the leather couch.

"Sure, I think it's class. You two must be knockin' the berries off the bush all right."

Myra nodded. "We get along," she said. "And you, Roxy, how are you

makin' out?"

Roxy shrugged. "About the same," he said. "I'd like somethin' more steady, but I ain't moanin'."

Myra said, "Maybe Dillon'd fix it for you."

"You think he would?" Roxy sounded eager.

Myra nodded. "I guess he'd be glad to. I'll speak to him when he blows in." The look of uncertainty came back.

"Ain't he around?" Roxy sounded disappointed. "I loped to see that guy."

Myra shook her head. "I'm worried," she said. "He ain't given me a buzz or nothin'."

Roxy leant back. "Well, he'll be along . . . you see."

Myra moved about the room. "What'll you drink, Roxy?" she asked.

"A rye if you've got it," Roxy said. "You sure have moved up in the world." He watched her mix the drinks, then he said casually, "You heard about Fan?"

Myra came over and gave him the rye. She shook her head. "No," she said. "What's Fan been doin'?"

Roxy held the glass up to the light and looked at the liquor thoughtfully. "She pulled out about three weeks ago. Left me flat. I miss that dame."

Myra raised her eyebrows. "What she want to do that for?" she asked.

"You know how it is. I guess we got along all right, but we just didn't think much of each other. She ran into some bird who'd got a lotta dough, and she joined up with him."

Myra said, "Who's the bird?"

Roxy shook his head. "She didn't tell me that," he said, stretching his legs out and looking at his feet. "Went off kind of mysteriously. Didn't even leave an address. She just said she'd found some guy who was goin' to stake her for a good time, and off she went."

Outside they heard the front door click, and Dillon walked in. He

stood in the doorway looking at Roxy, a little startled. Roxy put his glass on the table and stood up. "Hello, Bud," he said. "I guess it's good to see you."

Dillon came over and shook hands. He didn't look at Myra. "For the love of Mike," he said, "this is a surprise."

Myra said, "Where've you been? I'm starvin'."

Dillon looked at her. "Yeah," he said, "I guess I've dealt you a raw hand. I got held up by Hurst just as I was leavin', and that guy jawed until right now. I'd've given you a buzz, only you know how he is."

Myra relaxed a little. "I was gettin' the jitters. I thought maybe you had been in a fight."

Dillon grinned. "I don't get into fights," he said. "This was just business."

Roxy thought he was lying, but he wasn't sure.

Myra said, "Look, honey, can you work Roxy in your outfit?"

Dillon hesitated a moment, then he nodded. "Sure, I'd be glad to. Suppose you come down to the office tomorrow an' let's talk it over."

Roxy was impressed in spite of himself. This Dillon was certainly a big shot now. He nodded. "I guess I'll blow," he said. "You two want to eat."

Myra saw him to the door. "Good, night, Roxy," she said. "Don't you worry. He'll find you a job. We owe you somethin'."

Roxy tipped his hat and grinned, then he let himself out of the apartment.

Myra came back. "Suppose we have somethin' to eat right here?" she said. "It's too late to go out."

Dillon was lying back in a chair, his eyes half shut. "You go ahead, I've had somethin'."

Myra stood looking at him, her mind suddenly suspicious. She started to say something, but changed her mind. She went into the kitchen and cut a meat sandwich. She stood, leaning against the kitchen table, thinking. When she had finished the sandwich she went back into the other room.

Dillon had gone into the bedroom. She could hear the bathwater running. She finished her rye and lighted a cigarette. She stood waiting until she heard him go into the bathroom, then she walked over to the telephone and dialled a number.

Hurst came on. He sounded irritable. Myra said, "I'm worried about Dillon, Mr. Hurst. You ain't seen him, have you?"

"Hasn't he come in?" Hurst sounded bored.

"No, I don't know where he is . . . I haven't seen him all day."

"Wasn't he with you tonight?"

"I tell you I haven't seen him all day," Hurst snapped. "He'll be along," and he hung up.

Myra dropped the receiver into its cradle. Her eyes were stormy. There was only one reason why Dillon had lied to her. So the heel was two-timing. Who was the woman? Her hands clenched at her side, wave after wave of rage ran through her. For a moment she played with the idea of shooting Dillon there and then, but she knew he was now in too strong a position to be cast aside. Myra knew that without Dillon she would have to start all over again. No longer would she have an apartment or money . . . No, Dillon must not be touched. It was the woman she'd have to go for.

Her rage subsided as she turned the problem over. The more she thought about it, the more she realized the danger she herself was in. Let Dillon find someone who really pleased him, and there was nothing to stop him from ditching her. He had Hurst and a tough mob at his back, and although she had given him ideas, and had helped him, she knew he was ruthless enough to toss her aside if she tried to make trouble for him.

She walked into the bedroom and began to undress. Dillon came out of the bathroom, humming to himself. She caught a glimpse of his face in the mirror. His eyes were dull; dark rings under them gave him a tired, heavy look. She caught her breath sharply, sitting there, her heart beating hard.

Dillon got into bed and snapped off the lamp at his side. "Come on," he said, "I wantta go to sleep."

She stood up, passing the comb through her hair. "You are tired tonight," she said, keeping her voice steady with an effort.

“Yeah,” Dillon grunted, “I’m damn tired. Get into bed for Gawd’s sake.”

She put the comb down on the dressing table and came over to him. She sat on the bed, looking at him with glittering eyes. “Shall I come in with you?” she almost snarled at him.

Dillon’s heavy face hardened. He sat up on his elbow. “Didn’t I tell you I’m beat?” he snapped. “Get into bed. I wantta sleep.”

“Too tired, even for love?” The gritty, suppressed rage startled him into wakefulness.

“What the hell’s this?” he said. “Can’t I get tired sometimes?”

“Not the way you’ve been gettin’ tired,” she shrilled. “I’m on to you—”

Dillon pulled back the bedclothes and swung his feet to the floor. He reached out and gripped her throat in his hand. She struck at him wildly, but his arm was too long. He held her away from him.

“That’s the way it is, huh?” he said softly. “You’re gettin’ too big for your pants. Jest because you’ve been laid a few times you think you can talk big. Okay, sister, here it is.”

He smacked her across her face hard with his open hand, at the same time releasing his grip on her throat. She fell off the bed and rolled on the floor. He kicked her hard in her ribs with his bare foot. She slid away with the force of the kick across to her own bed.

“Now get to sleep an’ shut your trap. You ain’t got anythin’ more than any other woman . . . get it?”

He pulled up the bedclothes and snapped out the light. She remained sobbing with rage on the cold floor.

* * *

Dillon used Jakie’s Poolroom on Nineteenth for his headquarters. The boys spent a lot of their time pushing the balls around, waiting for something to turn up. Dillon had a little office at the far end of the poolroom. It was quite a place. He had a rolltop desk and several modern chairs of chromium and leather. The door had a ground-glass

panel with 'AUTOMATICS, LTD.' painted on it, and in smaller letters at the bottom right-hand corner, 'Manager'. Dillon liked that, it made him feel good.

When Roxy blew in during the early afternoon the poolroom was full. Dillon's boys were drinking, talking and playing snooker. They glanced up when Roxy came in, looked at him suspiciously and glanced at one another.

Roxy stood in the doorway, his hat tipped over his eyes. "Mr. Dillon around?" he asked.

One of them jerked his thumb to the door. "In there," he said briefly.

Roxy started across the floor. A big bird suddenly got in his way. "Hey!" he said. "Where the hell do you think you're goin'?"

Roxy said patiently, "I wantta see Dillon."

The big bird said, "Wait." He ran his hands over Roxy, feeling for a gun, then he knocked on the door and put his head round. He withdrew after a moment and nodded at Roxy. "Go ahead," he said. "You're okay."

Dillon was thumbing through a newspaper, half hidden by the top of the desk. He glanced up and looked at Roxy thoughtfully.

"Jeeze! Quite the big shot," Roxy said.

Dillon said coldly, "Come on in, an' shut the door."

Roxy closed the door and sat down. He ran his fingers over the stove-pipe furniture. "Hot, ain't it?" he said admiringly. "This is some joint."

Dillon opened a drawer and took out a box of cigars. He pushed them over to Roxy. "You wantta join up?" he said.

Roxy selected a cigar, bit the end off and spat it from his mouth. "Yeah," he said. "I'd like to get into somethin' steady. My racket is gettin' shot to hell."

Dillon looked at him thoughtfully. "What I'm goin' to tell you ain't to go further," he said, keeping his voice low.

Roxy looked a little startled, but he nodded. "Sure, I don't talk," he said. "You should know that!"

Dillon hitched his chair closer. "I'm figgerin' you're the guy I've been lookin' for," he said. "Maybe I'm wrong, but I don't think so. Listen. At the moment I'm runnin' this automatic racket an' I'm picking up around fifteen grand a week. Nice, but nothin' to rave about. Hurst's got a grand organization. He's got protection. He's got a real tough crowd workin' for him. This Hurst guy gets so far, but he don't go the limit. With his organization, he could go the limit."

Roxy drew on his cigar, letting the heavy smoke slide from his mouth. "What's the limit?" he asked.

Dillon said very quietly, "Little Ernie's the limit."

Roxy's eyes narrowed. "I don't get that," he said.

"I want to take over Ernie's part of the town. Hurst won't stand for it, but I guess if I did it he'd have to stick by me an' like it."

"What's that to me?" Roxy asked cautiously.

Dillon looked at him hard. "The whole town'd be too big for me to handle. I gotta have a guy I could trust. You'd get in on this on the ground floor."

Roxy said, "Maybe Hurst wouldn't stand for it."

Dillon got up and walked to the door. He opened it and glanced outside, then he came back and put his head close to Roxy's. "Maybe what Hurst says won't count any more."

Roxy looked up into his black eyes. He shifted uneasily at the malevolence there. He hastily turned his eyes, and studied the grey ash of his cigar. "Got the mob at the back of you?" he asked.

Dillon nodded. "Yeah," he said. "Those guys out there see me all the time. I tell 'em to do this an' that an' they do it. Okay. When the time comes, an' Hurst fades away, those guys ain't asking questions. They'll just go on takin' orders from me . . . get it?"

Roxy thought a little, then he said, "You've got somethin' there."

Dillon nodded. "Yeah, I guess I got somethin' there all right."

Roxy said, "I bet Myra thinks that's a good stunt."

Dillon scowled. "That dame don't count," he said coldly. "She's gettin' big ideas, an' she's goin' to get a surprise one of these days."

Roxy looked startled. "I like Myra," he mumbled. "She's got what it takes."

Dillon shrugged, and stood up. "When I'm ready, I'll tell you," he said. "Can I count on you?"

Roxy said, "Sure, you can count me in. I've been waiting for a break like this for some time. I guess I was too cautious when I was runnin' around with Fan. You seen her, by the way?"

Dillon shot him a quick, suspicious glance. "I ain't seen her," he said.

Roxy sat down on the edge of the table. "Listen, Bud," he said evenly. "Don't let's start this game with a double-cross. I ain't sore you pinched Fan from me. I miss her just like I'd miss a deck of cards I got used to, but that's all."

Dillon clenched his fists. His eyes gleamed at Roxy. "You been checkin' up on me?" he said, a gritty sound in his voice.

Roxy said hastily, "Hell! I wouldn't do a thing like that. I just heard—"

Dillon said, "It'd better get no further. I don't want that little bag Myra gettin' ideas about Fan."

Roxy shook his head. "She ain't dumb," he said thoughtfully. "You watch her. She'll get on to it."

Dillon began pacing the small office. "I'm gettin rattled with that dame. I guess she's about washed up with me. She'll have to get to hell out of it."

Roxy touched the ash off his cigar into the tray. "You'll have a little trouble," he said. "I'd be careful how you handle that bird."

Dillon shot him another cold look. "I can handle her," he said. "You keep your nose clean on this. Anyway, suppose you get to work an' wise yourself up on Little Ernie's territory? What I want is a list of all the smalltime stores, hotels an' suchlike who could take on automatic machine. You walk round an' take a look at the ground. You're on the payroll now, so you might as well get used to a little work."

Roxy grinned. "I get it," he said. "What you pay in?"

"I'll give you a couple of hundred bucks an' ten per cent on the take when we get goin'."

Roxy shrugged his shoulders. "I guess you're right about gettin' rid of the big shots. I could do with a little of their share."

When he had gone, Dillon went over to the telephone and rang Fanquist. Her slow drawl floated to his ear. "Listen, baby," he said, speaking close to the mouthpiece, "I've just had a word with Roxy. He knows, but that guy is shootin' on the level. I've fixed him up to work for me, an' he ain't goin' to start trouble."

Fanquist started her old beef. "When are we really goin' to get together? I'm sick of this jumpin'-in-an'-out-of-bed stunt of yours."

Dillon said sharply, "It ain't time yet. Myra wants handlin'."

Fanquist said, "Why the hell don't you toss that piece of ass out on her can?" Her voice was suddenly strident and furious.

"I tell you it ain't time for that yet," Dillon snarled. "Suppose you leave this to me?"

"Am I seein' you today?"

Dillon looked round his office, a harassed expression on his face. "You gotta have patience—" he began.

"That's another tune I'm getting sick of," Fanquist said bitterly. "You make me tired. I guess I'm a sucker to stand for it. All right, if that's the way you feel I guess you can stay away." She hung up.

Dillon slammed the receiver down on the prong and mopped his face with his handkerchief. Women were hell, he thought. Before Myra had come along and he had started fooling with her, he just kicked women around; now they had him crawling. What the hell had come over him?

The door opened and Hurst walked in. For a moment Dillon was startled. Hurst never came to this place. He got to his feet. Hurst looked at him thoughtfully, then nodded. He walked over to a chair and sat down. "I was passing, so I thought I'd look in and hear how things were going," he said.

Dillon sat down. "They're all right."

"No trouble?"

Dillon shook his head. He gave a bland smile. "Why, no, Mr. Hurst, I

guess things are goin' mighty smooth just now."

Was Hurst looking at him in an odd way, or was he imagining things?

Hurst said abruptly, "What's wrong with your girlfriend?"

Dillon raised his eyes. A muscle in his jaw twitched. "Myra? I don't get it."

Hurst shrugged. "She pulled me from a game last night asking where you were."

Dillon suddenly went cold. Aw, she's always like that if I'm a shade late," he said carelessly. "I'll tell her not to worry you."

Hurst got to his feet. "That's okay," he said. "I just wondered." He moved to the door. With the handle in his hand, he glanced back over his shoulder. "You ain't causin' Little Ernie any worries?"

Dillon knew now why he had come in. Since Little Ernie had sent two gunmen after him, Hurst was scared sick of any other trouble starting.

Dillon shook his head. "We're leavin' em alone," he said quietly, and grinned to himself. This punk would have a tit if he knew what was going to happen.

Hurst nodded. "That's it," he said. "You leave those guys alone. We can get along without treading on their corns."

Dillon watched him go, and when the door had closed he stretched his neck and spat viciously into the brass spittoon by the desk.

The news that Myra knew that he wasn't with Hurst the previous night infuriated him. He sat back in his chair and tried to reconstruct the scene between them. Myra was no sucker. She knew there was another woman. His brows came down. Just let her start something, he told himself. If she thought she could push him around, she'd got a surprise coming. Hurst and Myra. They both knew too much for his comfort. Maybe . . . He sat there thinking. Yeah, maybe . . . He'd have to watch those two. It looked like he'd have to do something.

His cold, sullen face became grimly set.

Myra waited until Dillon had left the apartment, then she began a systematic search. She knew Dillon had no head for addresses. Somewhere, she was sure, she would find a clue that would lead her to this broad. Her face hard and set and her hands impatient, she went carefully through Dillon's wardrobe. She turned out every pocket, but she found nothing. She went through his drawers, careful not to disturb anything, but again she was unsuccessful.

She sat back on the bed thinking. This was getting her nowhere. He must have written the address down. She was certain of it. The only hope was he would be carrying it on him. That would make things difficult. She went once more to his compact room. Three soiled evening shirts caught her eye, hanging up on a peg. He'd been too lazy to throw them out for the wash.

On the cuff of one of them she found what she was looking for. Scribbled in pencil was an address—158 Sunset Avenue.

She stood there, holding the shirt in her hand, a cold fury sweeping over her. "You see, you two-timin' bastard, this whore of yours is goin' to get a shock."

Putting the shirt carefully back in the cupboard, she went to her drawer and found her gun. It was a toy affair with a mother-o'-pearl handle, exceedingly unpleasant at close quarters. She put on her hat and coat and shoved the gun in her handbag. Then she stood hesitating. Maybe this wasn't quite the job for a gun. A hard little smile reached her mouth. She took from Dillon's drawer a length of solid rubber hose. She balanced it in her hand thoughtfully. Then, winding the thong round her wrist, she forced the hose up her sleeve.

Slamming the front door behind her, she took the elevator to the street level. A yellow taxi shot to the kerb and she nodded briefly. "Sunset Avenue," she said. "An' flog your horse."

The taxi jerked away. The driver said, "This is a hell of a town. I've never run into any guy who ain't in a hurry."

Myra wasn't in the mood to talk. She said nothing.

The taxi driver studied her in the mirror thought she was easy on the eye, and let it go at that.

Sunset Avenue was at the far end of the town. It took them a good

half-hour's run to make it. The driver suddenly crammed on his brakes. "Here it is, lady: what number jer want?"

Myra said, "Stop here . . . this'll do." She got out of the cab and paid him off. Then she walked slowly down the Avenue looking for 158. Her fury was smouldering by the time she found it. The place was a neat little villa standing in a fair-size garden. A place like this would cost money to keep up, she thought, and for a moment she hesitated. Maybe she had made a mistake. This place might be where one of Dillon's business associates hung out. Her step faltered. Then she thought she'd come this far, it wouldn't take long to check it up.

She walked up the crazy pavement and rang on the bell. She stood waiting, uncertain of herself. The door jerked open and Fanquist gaped at her.

It was certainly a shock to Myra. She saw it in a flash. Dillon was the rich guy who was staking this floosie to a good time.

She said quietly, "Hello. I bet this is a surprise."

Fanquist got her nerve back. She said, "My Gawd, it's the kid again! What the hell you doin' here?"

Myra said, "Dillon told me you had moved, so I thought I'd look you up."

"Dillon told you?" Fanquist's eyes hardened.

Myra nodded. "Sure. May I come in? I'd love to look around."

Fanquist stood squarely in the doorway. She said in a hard voice, "Scram . . . go on, get to hell out of here!"

Myra could see two men wandering down the street. She had to get inside quick. Still keeping a smile on her face, she said, "Why, Fan, that ain't the way to talk. I gotta message for you." She opened her bag casually. Fanquist watched her, a puzzled look on her face. She wondered what the hell all this was leading to.

Myra took the gun out of her bag and showed it to Fanquist. "Get inside quick, you bow-legged street pushover," she said with a rush.

Fanquist's eyes opened very wide, and she went white under her rouge. She took a step back, and Myra stepped in and shut the door.

A big living room opened out from the hall, and Myra drove Fanquist in there. The room was expensively furnished.

Myra said between her teeth, "So this is the love nest, is it?"

Fanquist stammered, "You're going to be sorry for this . . . Wait until he hears about it."

"Sit down, you bitch," Myra said. "I've got a lot to talk to you about."

Fanquist said harshly, "You ain't throwin' a scare into me. You better get out an' get out quick."

"Sit down," Myra repeated. She held one hand behind her back, jerking the rubber club down from her sleeve.

Fanquist was getting her nerve back all right. She sneered. "That rod ain't gettin' you anywhere . . . Get out!"

Myra swung the club round and hit Fanquist across her face with it. Fanquist staggered back, the chair struck her behind her knees, and she collapsed into it. She held both her hands over her face, the pain striking her dumb. Myra stepped back a little and waited.

"Maybe you'll jump to it next time," she said.

"You're goin' to pay for this," Fanquist gasped. "My God, you're goin' to pay for this!"

"Listen, you bohunk. You're goin' to clear out of this town quick, an' you'll stay out. I'm just givin' you a warning."

Fanquist took her hands away from her face. Her eyes glittered murderously. She screamed suddenly, "You can't make me get out! . . . Dillon's mine now—He's mine—do you hear?"

Myra's face was hard. She took a step forward. The .25 was pointing directly at Fanquist. "That's what you say," she snapped. "You're goin' okay, and you're goin' for good."

Fanquist moved like a snake striking. She smacked Myra's hand away, sending the gun flying across the room. At the same time she sprang forward, her head down, and her hands grasping Myra's waist.

Myra went over with Fanquist on top of her. They both hit the floor with a crash that jarred the room. Fanquist shifted her hands quickly, trying to catch Myra round the throat. Myra got her chin down, so

Fanquist only got a grip on her jaw. Swinging the club up, Myra hit Fanquist on the shoulder. It was a glancing blow, but it made Fanquist squeal. She made a grab at Myra's hand, but missed, and got another sock from the club.

Myra was twisting like an eel, trying to get from under Fanquist, but she was too heavy for her. She kept beating Fanquist with the club, but there was no weight behind the blows. They hurt Fanquist, but not enough to shake her off. All the time, she was lunging to get Myra's arm pinned down with her knee.

Myra got in a lucky one, hitting Fanquist on the side of her head. Fanquist went crazy with the pain. She grabbed Myra by the hair, banging her head twice on the floor. Myra stiffened her neck, checking the force, but even then it half stunned her.

Letting go of the club, so that it swung by its thong, she reached out, catching Fanquist's ears. Fanquist was wearing big pearl stud earrings. Myra wrenched them away, splitting the lobes as she did so. Fanquist let go of her and put her hands over her ears, screaming like a train going through a tunnel. Blood ran through her fingers, down her neck.

Myra hit her across her eyes with her open hand, sending her reeling backwards. A sharp kick got Myra in the clear. Fanquist crawled up on her hands and knees. Myra stiffened, then launched herself at her again. They went over in a heap, upsetting a small table and sending two chairs flying with a crash. Myra's clutching hands ripped Fanquist's dress down the front, and as Fanquist, screaming wildly, tried to roll clear, Myra clawed her down her bare back, making four long deep grooves.

Fanquist was terrified. She was half-crazy with pain and panic. She just wanted to get out of the room, away from those claw-like fingers. Somehow she managed to wriggle loose and get to her feet. She ran with unsteady steps to the door. Myra heaved up and collared her round the knees, bringing her crashing down on the floor again.

“Let me go . . . let me go . . . let me go! . . .” Fanquist screamed twisting and kicking.

Again Myra clawed her, ripping her clothes, stripping her to the waist.

Fanquist tried to fight back, making a lunge at Myra's eyes with her nails. Myra jerked her head away, and hit her across both wrists with the club. She put a lot into that blow. Fanquist fell on her knees, her head swimming with pain.

“Now you two-timin’ floosie,” Myra panted, “here’s what’s comin to you.” She kicked Fanquist in her side, sending her over hard. Fanquist was past squawking. Her eyes wide with terror and pain, she crouched there, moaning Blood glistened on her body like paint.

Myra said, “Get up before I start on you again. Go on, get up you heel!”

Fanquist dragged herself off the floor, her breath coming in great heaving sobs. “Don’t . . . hit me . . .” she whined. “I’ll . . . play ball . . .”

Myra sneered. “I ain’t finished with you,’ she said. “I’ve got a long way to go before I’m through with you.”

Fanquist, giving a strangled cry, turned and stumbled to the door. Myra threw a chair in her way. Fanquist banged her knees against it and went forward, falling across the chair with a thud that shook the breath out of her body.

Myra sprang forward, and driving her knee into Fanquist’s shoulders, she pinned her.

Fanquist screamed, a real terror gripping her. With one hand pushing her face into the carpet, Myra swung the club with the other.

“Go on,” Myra said, “you yell . . .”

She began to beat Fanquist’s arched back with all her strength. Fanquist wriggled and screamed, but Myra held her. She tried to protect herself with her hands, but the club beat them away, sending waves of pain up her arms as well as through her body. Myra beat her until she drooped over the chair, limp and silent.

Standing there breathless, Myra said, “I guess that’s all.”

Fanquist didn’t move. She was past hearing anything. Myra dragged her off the chair and turned her over on her back. She stood over her, a hard little smile on her mouth. “I guess you won’t pull any more tricks with me,” she said.

Leaving Fanquist lying there, Myra went into the bathroom. Her dress was stained with blood and her hair was like a woollen rug. She poured some water into the hand basin and bathed her face. She carefully washed her hands and sponged the blood from her dress. All the time she was doing this her mind was active.

Would Dillon start something now? she wondered. She guessed Dillon would be mad about this. A pair of electric hair-tongs caught her eye. She stood looking at them, hesitating. She picked them up and turned them over in her hand, then she took the plug and plugged it into the socket. She turned the switch.

Going back into the outer room again, she stood over Fanquist. Fanquist was lying there, her arms thrown wide and her breath coming in a whistling sound through her open mouth.

Myra said between her teeth, "I guess you ain't goin' to have any looks in a little while. He's kind of fussy about the broads he takes around, an' a bag with marks on her mug like you're goin' to have ain't getting to the first base with him."

She turned and walked with vicious determination back to the bathroom and to the red-hot tongs.

* * *

The next two days Dillon was very quiet. Myra expected him to say something, but he didn't. Sometimes she caught him looking at her thoughtfully, but he always shifted his eyes when she looked up.

He came back from the poolroom at his usual time, and Myra began to believe that nothing would be said. She made a few enquiries and learnt that Fanquist had disappeared. The villa was empty and deserted. Myra thought she'd done a nice job of work, but Dillon was still quiet and he still looked at her, as if he wasn't quite sure what to do.

Sitting in his office, Dillon brooded about Fanquist. He had gone down in the evening and found her. Even his brutal mind was shocked. But as he looked at her, any feeling he might have had for her went away. The two deep burns across her face sickened him. Her sobbing whine gave him the jitters. He had said brutally and bluntly that she'd better get out of town.

Myra scared him a little. She was getting too dangerous. When he had put through his plan of fixing Little Ernie, he'd have to do something about her. She had served her purpose, and now he felt he had outgrown her.

Outside in the poolroom, the buzz of talk suddenly stopped. Dillon stiffened. He cocked his ear, a frown on his face. The sounds from outside were no more to him than the ticking of a clock. He was used to them, and suddenly to have a heavy silence made him think something was wrong.

Before he could move from his chair, the office door pushed open and two men wandered in. Dillon looked at them, his mouth going to a thin line.

Strawn pushed his hat to the back of his head and rubbed his thick nose with the side of his finger. "Well, look who's here," he said, speaking out of the side of his mouth.

The other man looked Dillon over with distaste.

Through the open doorway Dillon could see the others standing like waxworks. He could see Sam Vessi holding a cue, as if he were going to make a shot, his head turned to the office, motionless. Jakie McGowan had his hands resting on the table, his thick features glistening with sweat. The others just stood or sat about motionless.

Dillon said, "You got no right bustin' in here, an' you know it." His black eyes glittered.

Strawn wandered farther into the room. Ain't you the guy I told to get out of this town?" he asked.

Dillon stood up. These birds weren't going to push him around any more. "Maybe you think you're smart with this line of talk," he snarled. "But it don't wash with me. You ain't got anythin' on me, so you can get the hell outta here."

Strawn said evenly, "So you're a big shot, huh? Well, listen, Big Shot, I still don't like you, an' I still say get out of this town. What do you think of that?"

Dillon shrugged. "You ain't causin' me any grief," he said. "I know where I am, an' you can't do a thing."

"One of these days," Strawn said quietly, "you an' me are goin' to take a ride. Smart guys like you always come unstuck . . . you see."

Dillon sat down again. "Okay," he said. "Maybe I'll take a ride with you. Maybe a lot of things. But right now you're using too much air around here."

Strawn nodded briefly. "I've heard a lot about you an' your girlfriend. You two are getting big. But you can't last. None of you guys can last. You think you can, but you can't."

He nodded to the other guy. "Take a look at him," he said. "I'll lay you ten to one we fix him in six months."

The other guy shook his head. "You just want to make money outta me," he said. "I've been caught like that before."

Dillon sat glowering at them, a blazing hatred surging through him.

Strawn nodded to him. "Okay, Big Shot," he said. "Don't keep us waiting too long." He jerked his head to the other guy, and they went out of the room.

When they had gone, Dillon got up and began to pace the office. Smart bastards, he thought savagely. If they thought they could pin anything on him, let them try.

Vessi, a thin little wop, put his head round the door. "You sure pushed 'em around," he said admiringly. "These Federal dicks are gettin' too big for their pants."

Dillon looked at him irritably. "You've gotta watch those guys," he said. "They're just waitin' a chance to crack down."

Vessi propped himself up against the door. "Sure," he said. "They've been on the lookout for us for a long time . . . It ain't gettin' them anywhere."

Just then the telephone rang, and Dillon nodded to him. Vessi went out, shutting the door. Dillon scooped up the phone. "Yeah?" he asked. His temper was short.

Hurst said, "Who the hell is that guy you got looking over Little Ernie's territory? Listen, Dillon, I told you to lay off that part of the town. Conforti's just been on, complaining we've got a man askin' questions in Little Italy. What's it all about?"

Dillon grinned a little. "Search me," he said. "How should I know?"

Hurst said furiously, "You know all right. Get that man out of there and keep him out. I know your ideas, Dillon, and I don't like them. I've told Conforti to take the matter into his own hands if that guy ain't out by tomorrow."

While he was speaking, Roxy came in. Dillon looked at him and jerked his head to the phone. He winked at Roxy and said "Hurst" with his lips not speaking. Roxy grinned and sat down quietly. He put his clothtop boots on the desk.

Dillon said, "They're crazy. I don't know a thing about it."

Hurst said, "You see to it, Dillon, or I'll come down and start something." He slammed down the receiver.

Dillon put the telephone down on the desk. His face was thoughtful. "You ain't been careful enough," he said to Roxy.

"What's that? A squawk?" Roxy tilted his chair back.

"Yeah!" Dillon took a quill from his vest pocket and began exploring his teeth. "Quite burnt up he was. I guess he figgered Little Ernie would start on him again, the yellow rat."

Roxy smiled. "I wasn't careful," he said. "I got right down to things." He took a sheet of paper from his inside pocket and tossed it on the desk in front of Dillon. "Take a gander at that," he said.

Dillon looked through the long list of names. "What the hell's this?" he asked.

"Look at 'em."

Dillon snarled. "Come on, cut out the mystery act. What is it?"

Roxy wasn't to be hurried. "All those guys there've got swell joints for your automatics. They've all got big corner stores and they've plenty of space. Suppose we persuade them to take six machines instead of one . . . That would be gettin' somewhere."

"Six? Are they big enough?"

"Sure they're big enough."

Dillon got to his feet. "Little Ernie's got to be fixed first," he said.

Roxy examined his fingernails. "I got him tied up."

Dillon stood still. "What was that?"

"I got him tied up. You've only to take the boys along an' there he is waitin' for you."

“What's this, Roxy? Let's have it fast.”

Roxy took his feet off the table. “Little Ernie and his mob will be at the Hot Rhythm Club tonight. They've got some big night on or somethin'; anyway, the gang will be there. Suppose we go an' join 'em? It would be a fine time to meet all the mob together.”

Dillon demanded, “Is this straight?”

“Yeah, it's straight all right. I've been usin' my ears around that part of the town.”

Dillon stood hesitating, then he said, “Wait here.” He went to the door and beckoned. Vessi and McGowan put their cues down and wandered over Dillon shut the office door. Vessi and McGowan ran the mob for Dillon.

He said. “Sit down, you two, I want to talk.”

They pulled up chairs and sat down. “What's up?” Vessi asked.

Dillon sat on the edge of his desk. “I'm puttin my cards on the table,” he said shortly. “We ain't expanding like we should. That's not your funeral, it's Hurst's an' mine. Hurst is scared of the other mob; I ain't. Okay. Suppose we expand an' not worry about Hurst?”

The two looked at each other, puzzled. McGowan said ponderously, “Say, we gotta do what Hurst says, ain't we?”

Dillon shrugged. “Why?” he asked. “Who the hell's Hurst, anyway?”

Vessi scratched his head. “Ain't he the boss any more?”

“Wait a minute,” Dillon said. “I want you to get the layout of this. If we expand, we'll have to get rid of Hurst an' we'll have to get rid of Little Ernie. Tough job, but ain't impossible. If we expand we make twice as much dough as we're making now. For instance you two guys will be holding down a couple of grand a week.”

Vessi's eyes opened. “Sure,” he said. “I guess we'll expand.”

“Don't rush it,” Dillon warned him. “If you come in on this there's goin' to be a lotta grief for someone . . . Maybe it'll be you an' me. If you want the dough, I guess you gotta earn it, so it's up to you.”

McGowan said, “What are you goin' to do?”

The door opened and Hurst walked in. The four men swung round, blinking at him. Even Dillon was startled.

Hurst stood there, a heavy frown on his face and his lips twitching with rage. "What's going on here?" he demanded harshly. "Get these guys out of here, I want to talk to you."

Vessi and McGowan hastily scrambled to their feet. They slid past Hurst as if they expected he was going to land them one.

Roxy sat where he was. He didn't look at Hurst.

Dillon pushed back his chair and drummed his fingers on the desk top. He stared at Hurst with blank eyes.

Hurst said, "Get this other guy out." He jerked his head at Roxy.

Dillon shook his head. He won't be in the way.

Hurst stiffened. "You heard what I said," he barked.

Dillon nodded. "Sure," he said; "but this guy ain't in the way. What's on your mind, Mr. Hurst? You seem sorta steamed up."

Hurst stood hesitating, then he sat down. "Look here, Dillon, this game of yours has gotta stop. I've told you before you gotta leave Little Ernie's ground alone."

"Can't you take it, Mr. Hurst?" Dillon sneered.

Hurst sprang to his feet. "What the hell's this?" he snapped. "You take your orders from me, and when I say leave off you leave off!"

"I've been getting some ideas that'll get us somewhere in this organization," Dillon said, speaking slow. "Suppose we push into that ground you're so scared about? Suppose we give Little Ernie the works? How do you like that?"

Hurst was speechless. His face turned a dusky red, and his big hands clenched on his knees. "My God!" he blurted out at last. "This finishes it. You're out, Dillon Do you hear? Out!"

Dillon pursed his heavy lips and shot a side look at Roxy. Roxy sat in a heap, his hat tilted over his eyes.

Hurst went on, "You're crazy to think of such an idea. A thing like that would blow the town to hell. I ain't having you around my mob

anymore . . . You get out."

Dillon leant forward, his eyes like ice chips. "Where did you get 'my mob' stuff?" he snarled. "You ain't got a mob no more, you yellow four-flusher. I got it, see? An' what I say goes with the mob. I've given you a chance, an' you're too damn yellow to take it. All right, from now on I'm runnin' this outfit, an' you're likin' it . . . get that?"

Hurst got to his feet. He controlled himself with an effort. "You're drunk," he said. "You haven't the brains to run any business. You want protection, an' you ain't got it. You're nobody. The cops would close you up damn quick without me right behind you."

Dillon sneered. "Do you think I've been in this game an' not got the lowdown to it? You ain't got any pull; you've got dough. I know how much you give the cops to lay off you, an' I'll give 'em more. The guy that pays the most gets the best service."

Hurst turned to the door. "You're washed up," he said shortly. "Get out and stay out!"

Dillon jerked his gun from inside his coat. "Just a minute, Mr. Hurst," he said between his teeth.: Hurst stood, frozen. Then he put out his hands like a blind man groping. "What are you doing with that gun?" he gasped, his face going suddenly flabby.

Dillon didn't bother to get to his feet. "You talk too much," he said. "If we're goin' to break, I guess we'll break the way I want it."

While he was speaking, his finger curled on the trigger, gently squeezing. The gun suddenly boomed, jerking a little in his hand.

Hurst took a step forward, his hands pressed to his chest. Then his knees gave, and he sank down. Leaning forward over the desk, Dillon shot him again. The heavy slug made a big hole in Hurst's head.

Dillon stayed there, leaning over the desk, his gun still pointing at Hurst, his lips off his teeth.

"Now, you bastard," he said, "you can stay dumb!"

Roxy tipped his hat back and stared. "Hey," he said, "you've spoilt your rug."

Myra sat before the dressing table, a loose silk wrap across her shoulders. Her skin was faintly red from the hot water of the shower. A cigarette dangled from her full red lips and the spiral of smoke rose over her head. She took time fixing her nails.

Dillon jerked open the door and walked in. Myra looked at him and glanced at the clock. It was not seven o'clock.

"You're early," she said, laying down the file. She pulled the wrap on and fastened the sash.

Dillon was very thoughtful. He went over to the window and, raising the blind a little, peered into the street. Myra watched him. She had an uneasy feeling that something had happened. "What is it?" she asked.

Without looking round, Dillon said, "Plenty." He stood there a moment, then he dropped the blind and came back to the middle of the room. With his hat at the back of his head, he stared at Myra with blank eyes.

She said, "For God's sake . . . what is it?"

"Hurst's washed up," he said abruptly.

"Little Ernie?" Myra got to her feet.

Dillon hesitated, then he shook his head.

"I did it."

Myra put her hand to her mouth. She took a step back, pushing the stool away.

"You did it?" she repeated. "Did what?"

Dillon moved restlessly. "I gave him the works," he said. "The yellow rat came in shootin' off his mouth, so I gave it to him."

Myra's eyes flashed. "Are you crazy?" she screamed. "You've killed Hurst, you goddam fool?"

Dillon went over to her with two quick strides. His hand shot out and

gripped her wrap, twisting it in his fist. He jerked her forward, so that their faces were close. "Shut up!" he snarled. "You shut your trap. I'm runnin' this outfit. I ain't standin' any yap from you. If you don't watch out, I'll knock you off."

Myra stiffened.

"Yeah, I mean that," he said, his eyes glaring at her.

She put her hand on his wrist. "Let me go," she said. "I won't start anythin'."

Dillon gave her a shove, sending her backwards. She sat down in the chair, her hands limply at her sides. "What are you goin' to do?" she asked.

Dillon, satisfied that he had fixed her, went over to an armchair and sat down.

"I've got the mob," he said, picking his words. "I've got the racket, I guess I'm goin' to be the big shot . . . the only big shot around here."

Myra said, "But the cops?"

Dillon sneered. "Hurst paid the cops. Okay, I'll pay 'em. They ain't to have any beef. I'll pay 'em better, see?"

Myra didn't say anything. She sat staring at the floor.

Encouraged by her silence, Dillon went on, "Tonight I'm goin' after Ernie. We've got him sewn up tight."

Myra jerked up her head. She just stared at Dillon, speechless. Dillon nodded at her, his triumph making him expand.

"Yeah," he said, "I've got the whole layout fixed. First Hurst. Okay, he's gone. Then Little Ernie . . . He goes tonight. Then I got this burg to play with. It means plenty of dough, baby, an' I'm gettin' the lot."

Myra beat her hands together. "For God's sake . . . can't you see where you're headin'? Little Ernie's got everything. He's got a bigger mob . . . he's got protection . . . the cops are behind him . . . Oh, hell! I tell you he's got everything."

Dillon grinned. "Okay. When he's washed up, I get it, so what?"

The telephone began to ring shrilly. Myra got up and answered it.

Dillon saw her suddenly stiffen. She said, "Sure he's here." She turned round. "Roxy wants you quick," she said. "Something gone wrong."

Dillon scowled, but he got up fast and took the receiver out of her hand. "Yeah, what is it?" he snapped.

Roxy said, "Listen, Bud. Vessi's blown the gaff. He's tipped Little Ernie off about tonight. You gotta get out fast. They're after you with rods."

Dillon went a dirty white. "After me?" he said, his voice rising. "What the hell do you mean, they're after me?"

"For God's sake," Roxy raved at the other end, "don't stand there yappin'. Get out quick. They've taken two cars and are on their way right now."

"Sure, I'll scram," Dillon said evenly. "Listen. Come on over, with a fast car. I ain't gotta car here. I'll meet you at the corner."

Roxy said, "I'll do that."

Dillon slammed down the receiver and swung round. His face was twisted with fury. "Come on," he said, "we gotta get out of here quick."

Myra sprang to the cupboard and snatched out a dress. Tearing the wrap off, she pulled the dress over her head. She put on a pair of shoes. She was dressed under thirty seconds. Her eyes were like two glittering pebbles.

"The Thompson," she said.

Dillon ran into the other room. As soon as he had gone, she hurriedly returned to the cupboard and took from an inside pocket of a coat hanging there a roll of money. She hastily slipped it into her bag, looking over her shoulder while she did so.

Dillon returned, carrying the riot gun. He went over to the door and opened it, looking into the dark passage. Then he jerked his head at her and walked out.

Myra heard a car draw up with a squeal of brakes. She ran over to the window and peered round the blind. Four men came bundling out of the car and ran across the pavement into the house.

She shouted to Dillon: "Come back . . . quick . . . they're here!"

Dillon slipped into the room again, and shut the door. He turned the key. For a moment he stood hesitating, then went over to the cupboard. "Give me a hand," he said. "Get this across the door."

They jerked and pulled the cupboard into position. Heavy footsteps came thudding down the passage and someone knocked on the door.

Dillon raised his hand to Myra. They stood looking at the cupboard, waiting.

Myra suddenly spun round and ran to the telephone. She hastily dialled Dillon made as if to stop her, then shrugged.

The desk sergeant at the other end of the line listened to her incoherent whispering.

"You're nuts," he said at last. "Things don't happen like that in this city. Take a pill . . . that's what you want." As he hung up, she heard him say, "Ernie's goin' for 'em now."

Myra dropped the receiver into its cradle. She turned round to Dillon, her eyes wide with fear. "It's a frame-up," she said jerkily. "The cops won't come."

A sneer went over Dillon's face. "Yeah?" he said. "I don't want the bulls to pull me outta this."

Again someone knocked on the door.

Dillon said softly, "Out the back way."

Quietly they left the room and went through the kitchen. The back door led down a long flight of steps to a dark alley. Dillon went first, holding the Thompson close to his side. Myra followed him. They went down the stairs slowly, watching the door at the bottom. Myra expected it to fly open any moment, and she felt her body cringing.

They got to the bottom without anything happening. Dillon snapped off the light before opening the door. He put his hand on her arm. "Get down flat," he said.

Myra crouched on the floor. Dillon knelt, reaching for the door handle. His hand was steady as he quietly turned it. The door came towards him very slowly. As the aperture widened he sank lower on the floor. Outside was black. It was just as if a heavy curtain hung in front of him. There was not a sound.

At last he got the door wide open. Faintly, he could hear them smashing the door down upstairs. He touched Myra's arm, and they began to crawl forward. Without warning a gun exploded above him. He heard the bullet smack against the wall, and the faint sound of the plaster as it ran down.

Raising the Thompson, he suddenly opened fire, sweeping the gun round in a half-circle. Above the roar of the gun he heard a strangled cry. He stopped firing and crawled on. The damp pavement touched his outstretched hand. Faintly, now that he was outside, the reflected lights of the city glowed over the high wall. The alley was still dark, but he could see a little. Drawing his breath sharply between his teeth, he stood up slowly, keeping the Thompson ready.

Nothing happened. Myra stood up, her heart pounding and came close to him. They began to walk slowly down the alley. Almost immediately, Dillon stumbled over a body. He didn't take his eyes off the exit to the alley. He carefully stepped over, raising his feet and feeling before he put his weight on them again. He kept on. The open street ahead of him, the deep shadows, and the knowledge that somewhere death was waiting for him, made his nerves tingle. He told himself if Roxy wasn't there he was sunk.

Myra said in little gasps, "Watch out . . . for God's sake watch out!"

Dillon said nothing. He went on, getting slower as the end of the alley crept towards him. When he was a few yards from the street, he went down on his hands and knees.

Myra's nerve cracked. She leant against the wall, letting him go on ahead. She was ready to spring after him if nothing happened, but she could go no farther until she knew.

Quite suddenly two men sprang into the alley Dillon could see them outlined against a street light. He started firing before his brain telegraphed to his hand. One of the men tossed up his hands and fell forward, but the other ducked out of sight.

Swearing softly, Dillon dived forward into the street. Excitement sent caution overboard. A gun exploded in his face, and he felt a little hiss of air as the bullet went past. He swept the gun round in an arc, firing wildly. The hideous roar echoed through the deserted street. The man who had fired at him was caught in the blast of lead. He crumpled up, lying with his head in the gutter.

Dillon saw a big closed car shoot over from the other side of the street

As he jerked the gun up, Roxy screamed his name, waving his hand frantically. He nailed the car just where Dillon stood. Myra sprang out of the darkness and scrambled in. Dillon got in as Roxy released the clutch with a bang. The car shot down the road. Behind them, they heard a burst of gunfire A bullet coming through the rear window smashed the windscreen.

Myra crouched on the floor, her head between her hands.

Dillon snapped, “Get into a side road . . . quick!”

Roxy shoved the pedal down to the boards, holding the car to the road. As a turning loomed up, he threw out the clutch, slammed on his brakes and swung the wheel over. The big car went into a skid, lurched up against the kerb and righted itself as Roxy released the brake.

“We've done it!” he said excitedly, as the car pounded down the road.
“We've beaten 'em to it!”

“All right, all right,” Dillon said.

They had been driving furiously for a short time. Roxy glanced at him and eased the pressure on the pedal.

“Stop her,” Dillon snarled. “Where in hell do you think you're rushin' to?”

Roxy drew to the side of the road. We gotta get outta town,” he said nervously.

“Wait a minute . . . wait a minute.” Dillon shifted the Thompson off his knees on to the floorboards. “Now what is all this? Come on, spill it . . . What is this riot?”

Roxy started to sputter, saw the hard gleam in Dillon's eyes and stopped. Then he took hold of himself and said, “Vessi ratted. You shook his nerve rubbin' Hurst. Somehow he didn't see you bein' boss long, so he runs to Ernie. McGowan didn't like the set-up, but he came along and blew it to me. I went after Vessi an' got him to talk. He said Ernie wasn't wasting time. He tipped the cops that you had knocked Hurst off, and then sent his boys after you.”

Dillon said, “Vessi?” There was a lot of hate in his voice.

“I took care of Vessi.” Roxy sounded satisfied. “He won't worry about

his dinner anymore."

Myra said from the back, "Get goin' . . . that smashed windscreen'll make the bulls curious."

"Shut your trap!" Dillon said, without looking round; then to Roxy, "You know where Ernie hangs out?"

"Sure . . . You ain't . . .?" Roxy twisted his body round in the car. His eyes suddenly widened with surprise.

"No yellow heel's runnin' me out of this burg," Dillon said between his teeth. "I guess we'll go an' call on that guy."

"Don't . . . no . . . don't be crazy." Myra struggled up from the floor. Her hands resting on the back of the seat, she again said. "No . . . no . . ."

Dillon shifted round and hit her with his open hand across her face, sending her back into the darkness with a crash. "I'll settle with you in a tittle while," he said. "Get goin'," to Roxy.

Roxy hesitated, then he started the engine. Swinging the car round, he headed back to the East side.

Dillon picked up the Thompson and examined it carefully, then he laid it down. "I guess this gun's too big for the job," he said thoughtfully.

Roxy said uneasily, "You'll never get in with that."

Dillon pulled his .45 from its holster and made sure that it was ready for use. He shoved it away again, and relaxed, watching the dark road. At the back, Myra sobbed quietly, now completely terrified.

Roxy said at last, "It's down on the left. I'll drive past it."

They went slower. Dillon kept well back in the darkness of the car.

"See? By that light. That's the joint."

As the car went past, Dillon looked the house over. Bright lights gleamed in most of the windows. It was big.

Dillon said, "Seems like there's goin' to be plenty of company."

Roxy didn't say anything. He was scared.

“Okay Stop her over the way. We'll go an' look at the place.”

Roxy ran the car into the shadows and turned off the engine. Dillon opened the door and got on to the street, looking cautiously up and down. The street was empty. Roxy came and stood at his elbow.

“You stay here,” Dillon said to Myra. “Get in the drivin' seat an' wait till we come. You gotta be ready to get goin' quick.”

Myra got out of the car and climbed into the driving seat. She sat there, hunched up over the wheel, silent.

Dillon leant into the car, his face quite close to hers. “Watch yourself, sister,” he said softly. “You try to pull a quick one on me an' you're goin' to have a bad time . . . get it?”

“It'll be all right,” she said.

“Sure it'll be all right,” Dillon said, and he jerked his head to Roxy. They walked slowly down the street, keeping on the opposite side of Ernie's place.

“We'll go round the back,” Dillon said, “Maybe he's got a fire escape or somethin'.”

Roxy nodded. He was feeling bad.

At the end of the street they crossed over and cut down an alley. They came down along the back of the buildings. Dillon counted each building carefully, then he stopped. “This is it,” he said.

They stood in the darkness and stared up Dimly they could see a fire escape straggling up into the darkness.

Dillon moved forward cautiously. He could see the swing-up several feet above his head.

“If I give you a back, you can reach it,” he said to Roxy.

Roxy came forward reluctantly. “You're goin' to start somethin' in this joint,” he said uneasily.

“Yeah!” Dillon leant against the wall. “You're goddam right. I am.”

Roxy put his small shoe in Dillon's hands and Dillon hoisted him up. The swing-up came within reach of Roxy's fingers. He pulled gently, bringing the escape down slowly. It made no noise.

Dillon began to walk up the escape quietly. Roxy followed him, Dillon peered into each window as he passed. Three rooms were in darkness, but on the fourth landing of the escape there was a blaze of light. Dillon shifted his gun from its holster and moved forward more slowly. Roxy stayed between the landings, waiting.

Dillon edged his way closer to the window and glanced in. There were a number of people in the room. Dillon's eyes fixed on a small apeish-looking man who was sitting in a big overstuffed chair in the centre of the room. He guessed that must be Ernie. He raised his hand and beckoned to Roxy.

Although the evening was close, the window was shut. Dillon could hear the buzz of talking faintly through the glass, and now and then the shrill high-pitched laugh of one of the women came to him with startling clearness.

Roxy crawled up on hands and knees. Dillon said, keeping his head close to Roxy's, "That Ernie, the little mug sitting there?"

Roxy took a quick look into the room and nodded. "Yeah," he mumbled, "that's him."

Dillon watched the scene in the room thoughtfully. He fingered his gun, but he knew it would get him nowhere if he did start shooting. He had got to go down four flights of escape and by that time he'd be as dead as a pork chop.

One of the women, a tall, brittle blonde, was making a big play at Ernie. She was holding a long glass full of Scotch, and by the way she giggled and swayed, Dillon guessed she was getting plastered fast.

Ernie was watching her under his hooded eyes. His face was expressionless, but his little black eyes never left her.

Dillon thought, in a moment or so something would blow up there.

Someone put on a gramophone and faintly Dillon could hear the rhythmic pulse of the music. The blonde began to swing it. She stood in the middle of the room swaying her hips at Ernie. The others grouped round the walls, clapping their hands and shouting to her. She stamped round the room, contorting her body and snapping her fingers in time with the rhythm.

Ernie sat like a stuffed monkey, his eyes gleaming a little brighter. She lifted her long skirts to her knees and pulled off a pretty fair high kick.

Ernie took his hand out of his lap and scratched the side of his face. He got out of the chair and she swayed over to him, wrapping her long arms round his neck.

Dillon thought they looked bad. She was a head taller than Ernie, and with her back turned to the window, Ernie disappeared from sight.

The others in the room watched with interest. One or two of the other women giggled, but they didn't get smart. Dillon reckoned that Ernie wouldn't stand for much, and he was right.

Maybe Ernie was a little guy, but he was right in the right places. He took the blonde by the arm and shoved her out of the room. The door closed behind them.

Dillon cursed softly. He turned his head and looked at Roxy. "Now what?" he said through his teeth. "Where the hell's that guy gone to?"

Roxy shrugged. He felt relieved. "I guess he's goin' to lay that dame," he said thoughtfully. "Maybe we'd better take it on the lam."

"I'm goin' to get that guy, if I have to stay here all night," Dillon returned. "Shut up, an' let me do the talkin'."

Roxy relapsed into gloomy silence. He glanced down into the dark street, but he couldn't see anything. Dillon suddenly clutched his arm. Roxy turned his head quickly. A light had sprung up on the next landing.

"They've gone up there," Dillon said. "Ain't that a break?"

Without waiting for Roxy to say anything, he climbed up on to the next landing.

The blonde was sitting on the bed trying to take off her dress. She was so drunk that she couldn't quite make it. She sat there struggling and giggling. Little Ernie was not in the room Dillon could see a light coming from a half-open door leading off the room, and he guessed he was in there.

The blonde got to her feet and lurched through the door, leaving the room empty. Dillon put his fingers under the window frame and quietly lifted the window. He had a little struggle, but he managed it. The window slid back without any noise.

Roxy came up, a gun in his hand. His eyes were popping out of his

head.

Dillon said quietly, "Stay here. If there's any trouble, shoot."

He put a leg over the windowsill and slid into the room. He stood listening in the middle of the room, his gun held by his side. Faintly, he could hear the two in the other room. They were not talking, but he could hear the blonde giggle and Ernie's grunts. He stepped quietly to the door and looked in.

Little Ernie was dressed in a salmon-pink dressing gown. He was standing with his back to the door. The blonde had got rid of her dress and she was facing Dillon. She was wearing a cloudy piece of chiffon that didn't cover her much. She saw Dillon standing in the doorway and she stiffened. The liquor died on her, leaving her sober and terrified.

Dillon said, "Don't move, you two. I'm itching to blast you."

Little Ernie didn't bat an eyelid Dillon had to hand it to him. He just stood looking inquiringly at the blonde. She folded her hands across her breasts and moaned softly.

Dillon moved into the room, stiff-legged, like a cat about to fight. He circled slowly round until he was behind the blonde, facing Ernie.

"I guess you didn't expect to see me?" he said evenly.

Little Ernie licked his lips. His small monkey-like face turned a little green.

"I'm the guy you tried to rub out tonight," Dillon said; "I guess this burg's too small for both of us. I guess you're comin' for a ride. Ernie . . . a one-way ride."

Ernie said, "Don't be a fool. You an' me can do things together in a big way." His voice was thick, as if he'd a clot in his throat.

Dillon sneered. "Yeah?" He shook his head. "You're too late on that stuff, Ernie . . . It's curtains for you." While he was speaking, he shifted his gun a little, so that he held it by its barrel. Then with a quick savage swing, he struck the blonde behind her ear with the butt of the gun.

She went down like an inanimate doll. Dillon had Ernie covered in one movement.

Ernie looked down at the blonde and shook his head. "That was a lousy one to pull," he said.

Dillon said, "Get goin' . . . you an' me are goin' for a ride."

Ernie looked at him, hesitated, then he turned and walked into the other room. He paused then. "I guess you'll let me dress?" he said.

Dillon said, "Get outta the window . . . quick." He rammed the gun into Ernie's back.

Ernie climbed out of the window. He started back against Dillon when he saw Roxy. Dillon shoved him forward roughly. "Get goin'," he said.

Roxy stood aside. Ernie began to move to the stairs. Dillon quietly slipped the gun into his holster and bent down quickly. He caught Ernie by his ankles and with a great heave threw the little man over the rail. It was done so quickly that Roxy couldn't believe his eyes. Ernie was there one second and vanished the next.

Just one terrified squeal sounded in their ears, then a heavy dull thud as Ernie hit the flags down below.

Dillon gripped Roxy's arm. "Get goin'," he said viciously. "We gotta get out of this quick."

They pelted down the escape and blundered into the dark alley. Dillon didn't pause to look at Ernie, but ran on to the street.

Myra started the engine as she heard them coming Dillon swung himself on to the running board. "It's okay," he said. "You get into the back Roxy can drive."

She clambered over the seat and Roxy got in under the wheel. His teeth were chattering, but he managed to engage the gear.

Myra said, "Did you get him?"

"What the hell do you think?"

Roxy said, "There's a guy in Springdale who'll hide us up until this blows over."

"Yeah?" Dillon said. "That's a good idea. You know this bird?"

"Sure . . ." Roxy spun the wheel at Twenty-third Street and headed the car up Kansas Avenue Bridge. "I know him all right He's safe and they

won't look for us there."

They shot across the bridge fast. Suddenly Myra leant forward violently and gripped Roxy's shoulder. "Stop! . . . stop! . . . stop!" she screamed.

Roxy was so startled he nearly piled the car into a wall. He crammed on his brakes, throwing Dillon forward. "What the hell's wrong?" he demanded.

Myra's face was livid in the street light. "Quick . . . where did you get this car?" she gasped.

Roxy twisted and looked at Dillon. "She gone nuts?" he asked angrily. "Jeeze, I nearly crashed this heap."

Dillon didn't like the look on Myra's face. He demanded harshly, "What is it?"

"Where did you get this car?" Myra repeated, pounding Roxy's arm with her fist.

"Where the hell do you think I got it?" Roxy said surlily. "I knocked it off."

Myra turned wildly to Dillon. "The fool's finished us," she shouted. "Can't you see we've taken this heap over the State line!"

Dillon suddenly turned on Roxy, his fist clenched above his head. "You sonofabitch!" he snarled. "You've got the Feds on to us."

Roxy stiffened. "Hell! You'll have a crowd round us. What the hell do you mean . . . got the Feds on us?"

Dillon said furiously, "It's a Federal offence to take a stolen car over the State line . . . Didn't you know that, you goddam bastard?"

Roxy engaged his gear. His face had gone the colour of putty. "They'll hang Hurst on to us now," he said unsteadily. They're sure goin' to get us now."

Myra said, "Get on . . . get on quick! We gotta get under cover."

The big car quickened. Dillon said, "When that bastard Strawn hears about this, he'll come a-runnin'."

Myra said between her teeth, "See what you've done, you lug." She

beat her fists on her knees. "We had it all an' you must get smart. I'm finished with you, do you understand? I'm washed up. We're through."

Dillon said, "You're through when I say so, an' not before. You know too much, an' what's more, Strawn will pin somethin' on to you . . . don't you think he won't."

Roxy called, "We gotta switch cars . . . this broken screen'll stop us. I'm goin' on a bit further, then we'll have to walk."

They drove on in silence. The night was very dark. There was no moon, and heavy threatening clouds hung low. Once in the open, the big beams of the car lit up the dirt road and they lurched and jolted as Roxy tried to keep up speed.

Dillon said in an undertone to Myra, "You got any dough?"

She said quickly, "What you think? I came away in a rush." She put her hand cautiously on her bag that hung on her wrist. Dillon leant forward and ripped the bag from her. For a moment she hesitated, then she flung herself forward. Dillon was expecting her to start something, and he swung a backhand, knocking her into the corner of the car. "Cut it out," he said viciously. "You ain't got no dough, so what you gettin' sore about?"

He put his hand inside the bag and felt the big roll of money. He grinned to himself in the dark. Taking the roll out, he transferred it to his own pocket. He tossed the bag into her lap.

She said feverishly, "Give me that dough."

Dillon said, "Be careful." There was such an ugly threat in his voice that she shivered.

Roxy slowed down. "Springdale's just ahead," he said, "I guess we'll ditch this heap an' walk."

He ran the car off the road and stopped. The three climbed out. Dillon said. "I'll look good carrying this Thompson."

Roxy said, "Suppose you wrap it in your coat?"

Dillon took off his coat and did as Roxy suggested. They began to walk down the dark road. Round the bend they could see lights.

Roxy said, "This guy we're goin' to has big ideas. You'll have to pay

him plenty."

Dillon said coldly, "We'll see about that."

They walked some way, Myra between the two men. Her mind was busy as she stumbled along the dirt road, not seeing where she was going. Dillon had got her money; without that she couldn't leave him. The Feds wouldn't stop until they got Dillon. Especially a guy like Strawn, who was just laying for him. Somehow or other she had got to get the money away from Dillon and get out quick, before anything happened. The Feds hadn't the same ideas as the cops when handling a woman.

"That's it," Roxy said suddenly.

Just ahead of them they could see the outline of a building. One solitary light gleamed through the window.

They hastened their lagging steps. Roxy said, "We'll go in the back, quiet."

They left the road and worked their way to the back of the building. It was so dark Myra kept stumbling, but the two men didn't offer to help her. She gritted her teeth furiously. She was on her own against these two, but she wasn't scared. She had plenty of confidence in herself.

Roxy rapped on the door with his knuckles. After a short wait, the door opened. A tall, thin form of a man peered at them.

"That you, Joe?" Roxy said. "Gee! Joe, it's nice to see you. These are a couple of friends of mine . . . Can we come in?"

The man stood aside. "Sure," he said, without enthusiasm, "come on in."

They entered a small, poorly furnished room, lit by an oil lamp. Roxy said, "This is Joe Chester, the guy I told you about."

Joe had a thin skull-like face, and his big yellow teeth stuck out, giving him a foxy look. He glanced at the three furtively, rubbing his hands on the seat of his trousers. "I guess I'm glad to know you," he said.

Dillon grunted. He glanced at Roxy and jerked his head.

Roxy said, "Listen, Joe. We wantta lie up here for a little while. Can

you fix it? You know how it is."

Joe said, "I'll get a drink I guess we can talk better with a drink."

He went out of the room.

Dillon said, "I don't like that guy."

Roxy shrugged. "He's okay. He'll fix us, you see."

Joe came back with a bottle and glasses. He put them on the table. The others sat down Myra sat away from them by the window. She glanced out into the dark night from time to time.

When the drinks were fixed, Joe said, "How long?"

"Maybe a couple of weeks, not more," Roxy said.

"It'll cost you a grand a week" Joe said, sniffing at his whisky.

Dillon moved jerkily, but Roxy put out his hand. "Wait a minute," he said.

Dillon shook his hand off. "This guy ain't goin' to start skinning me," he snarled. "A grand? You're crazy!"

An oily smile went over Joe's face. "It came over the radio ten minutes ago," he said softly. "You three are wanted by the Department of Justice for pinching a car, and the State police are after you for the murder of Hurst."

There was dead silence in the room. Myra ran her fingers through her hair. She shot a look of hatred at Dillon, but she said nothing. He started it and it was up to him to see it through.

Dillon stood up. "So what?" he said.

Joe spread his dirty hands on the table. He nodded his head. "You three are hot. You're too damned hot. I know Roxy . . . I'm a friend of his, so I take risks, but I guess I gotta get well paid for takin' 'em."

Dillon wandered over to Joe. "You'll get well paid, but you ain't gettin' a grand a week. You'll take five hundred bucks an' like it, get it?"

Joe shook his head. "That ain't any use to me, mister . . ." he began.

Dillon reached out and gripped Joe's shirt. "Listen, punk," he snarled.

"I'm booked to sit on the end of a stream of hot juice—one more guy to get knocked off don't help me anyway, see?"

Joe turned a dirty white. "You're the boss, mister," he said hoarsely. "My ma'll look after you. We gotta farm in the hills. Roxy knows it. They won't find you there."

Dillon took his hand away and, glanced at Roxy, who nodded at him. "Sure," Roxy said, "it's a good place."

"We want another car," Dillon said.

Joe said, "I'll sell you mine. It's old, but, by heck, it goes all right!"

Dillon turned his back so that Joe couldn't see the size of his roll. He pulled off some bills and put the rest in his pocket.

"I'll give you twelve hundred bucks. That's for the car an' two weeks' rent."

Joe took the money and counted it carefully. He couldn't keep the pleasure off his face. He just gloated at the sight of so much dough.

Dillon walked over to him. His face was hard. "Listen, bozo," he said. "Get the car an' get some drink on board. I want a pile of grub too. That comes outta the dough I've just slipped you."

Joe looked at him and cringed a little. "Sure," he said; "I'm glad to help you folks."

When he had gone out, Dillon said to Roxy, "You think you're smart? Pushin' me on to a chiseler like that."

Roxy didn't say anything. He just shrugged. They stood there waiting.

Joe came back. "The car's ready," he said. "You've got plenty of gas. I've put in the things you want."

Dillon said, "Can you find this dump, Roxy?"

"Sure, I know where it is."

"Well, come on for God's sake. We ain't got all night to hang about."

Joe saw them to the door. "I'll be over in a few days. I'll let you know how things go."

Dillon grunted and got in the back of the car with Myra. Roxy took the wheel. The car shot off into the night.

Roxy kept the pedal down. The car tore down the rough road, jolting them violently.

“This place far?” Dillon shouted to him.

Roxy shook his head; then, remembering that Dillon couldn't see him, shouted, “No. It'll take us about a couple of hours.”

They drove on in silence after that. The car jolted on and on; its beams lighting the rough road, making the potholes look like craters.

Myra raised her head suddenly. She put her hand on Dillon's arm. He had been catnapping and jerked up. “What the hell?” he growled.

“Listen,” she said.

He thought he could hear something above the roar of the old engine, but he wasn't sure. He jerked round and looked through the rear window. In the distance he saw a single beam of light, jerking behind them.

He listened again and faintly he heard the wail of a siren. Instantly his mind came alive.

“There's a cop behind us,” he snapped to Roxy.

Roxy was so startled that he nearly ran off the road. The flickering light was coming up fast.

“Shove her along,” Dillon snarled. “He's comin' up like hell.”

Roxy pressed the pedal down hard, and the car drew away a little. That seemed to get the cop. They could hear the roar of his engine as he forced his machine forward. The siren screamed in their ears.

Dillon jerked out his gun and smashed the rear window.

“Not yet . . . don't shoot yet!” Myra cried.

Dillon took no notice. He fired twice at the light, but the jolting of the car spoilt his aim. The cop swerved a little, but kept on. Dillon flung the gun down on the seat and groped for the Thompson. “I'll settle this punk,” he said viciously, jabbing the nose of the Thompson through the broken window.

Just as he was squeezing the trigger the cop started firing. He fired four times, and each time the bullet smacked into the back of the car.

Dillon dug the butt of the gun into his shoulder and fired back, sweeping the gun in a half-circle. He kept the barrel down. The light of the pursuing machine went out.

“I got him!” he shouted to Roxy. “Get on . . . he's finished.”

He put the gun down and sank on to the seat. “I guess we're gettin' a little hot,” he said.

Something touched him and he jerked away. Something hot and sticky was on his hand. For a startled moment he thought he had been hurt, then he knew he couldn't have been. He peered into the darkness.

Myra was lying back in the corner of the car.

“What is it?” he said. “You hurt?”

She gave a sudden cough.

Dillon said to Roxy, “Stop . . . she's been nicked.”

Roxy hesitated. “Anyone behind?” he asked.

Dillon looked back, then he said. “No . . . stop now.”

Roxy pulled up and turned the spotlight round, switching on the beam. They both looked at Myra.

She was huddled up. Her hand was pressed to her right side. Dillon could see the blood oozing through her fingers.

He swore softly. “You hurt bad?” he said.

She raised her head slowly. Her mouth was screwed up and he could see the marks of her teeth on her lip, where she had bitten the pain silent. The glaring light made her look ghastly. Her hair had gone limp and beads of sweat made her look as if she had just come out of rain.

Roxy leant well forward, gaping at her. “We gotta get a doctor to her,” he said. “She looks bad.”

Dillon looked at him hard. “Sure she looks bad,” he said slowly. “Yeah, we better get a doctor.”

Roxy swung round and started the engine. Dillon put his hand on his shoulder. "Wait," he said. "We can't drive into a town with her like that . . . It would start something. I'll stay here an' look after her." He put a lot of meaning in the last words.

Roxy started to argue, but a look that had come into Dillon's eyes stopped him. "Okay," he said huskily.

He reached forward and turned off the engine, then he opened the door and got into the road. Dillon said under his breath, "I'll sound the horn."

Myra raised her head. "Roxy . . . where . . . are . . . you . . . goin'?"

Roxy said, "I'm gettin' a croaker . . . you'll be okay . . . just you stay quiet."

A sudden wave of panic swept over Myra. "Roxy . . . don't leave me . . . don't leave me . . . with him!"

Roxy was already walking quickly down the dark road, his shoulders arched as if he expected a violent blow.

Dillon reached up and shoved the light out of her eyes. "You're goin' to be okay now," he said.

Myra crouched back against the seat. "Give me a break," she implored him. "I know what . . . you're goin' to . . . to do. Don't . . . please—"

Dillon leant forward. "You nuts or somethin'?" he said. His face was glistening. Two deep lines ran from his nose to the corners of his mouth. "What you squawkin' about?"

"You wouldn't . . . treat . . . me like a dog?" she gasped.

Dillon threw off pretence. "You didn't give Fan a chance, did you?" he snarled. "You burnt her, didn't you, you little heel? You took all that dough an' I wasn't to see any of it. You know too much, sister—"

"Look, I'm bleedin' . . . It hurts so . . . don't hurt me anymore." She took her hand from her side and tried to reach him. He shied away from her blood-encrusted fingers. Quietly he groped for his gun. His fingers closed on the cold barrel. He got a grip and drew it off the seat, holding it behind his back.

"Sure I'll give you a break," he said, grinning at her.

She was dazed with the pain and loss of blood. She could only see his outline bending over her, and his words came to her faintly. She began to cough again, and a sudden rush of blood to her mouth terrified her.

"I'm scared . . ." she whimpered. "I'm scared . . ."

Dillon brought his hand from behind his back. His arm flashed up and then down. He hit her on the top of her head with the gun butt with all his strength. In the silence of the night he heard her skull crack. Blood came out of her mouth again as she fell forward.

Dillon scrambled out of the car. He ran round to the other side and opened the door. Then, cautiously, he fumbled for her in the dark. His hand touched her head and he drew back, catching his breath a little. His hands were slippery with her blood.

He stood there, glaring at her dim outline, suddenly frightened to touch her. In a fit of insane panic he began to beat her head and shoulders with the gun butt. At last he stopped and stood panting, his chest heaving and his mouth slack. Her two legs hung indecently from the car door. The rest of her was hidden in darkness. Moving forward slowly, he reached down and wiped his hands on her stockings. He did it in little jerks, as if he expected the legs to come to life.

The moon suddenly swung above the clouds, lighting the road. Roxy sat on the grass farther up the road, his head in his hands. He swore continuously, refusing to let his brain dwell on what was going on. Two short blasts from the horn of the car made him get unsteadily to his feet.

* * *

Ma Chester was a small, mean-looking woman, with hard eyes and a thin pinched mouth. She stood on the stoop of the farmhouse and looked down on them. Round her waist was a piece of sacking that did for an apron. Her gnarled hands were folded across her withered breasts, and Dillon could see her black broken nails clawing at the cotton stuff of her dress.

The farmhouse was well hidden in the hills. It was several miles from the main road, and stood entirely alone. It was well off the beaten

track.

The sun was just up. Dillon and Roxy had spent the night in the woods, fearing to call at the farmhouse at night. They were both tired and irritable. Dillon's nerves seemed to stand outside his body, so that the slightest movement or sound jarred him.

Roxy handled Ma Chester. She seemed to know all about it. Joe had got her on the telephone.

She said, "I guess you two want to see your room."

They followed her into the farmhouse. There, was a smell of dirt and cooking in the place. Dillon twitched his nose a little.

The main living room was bare and dirty. An old man who looked old enough to be Ma Chester's father sat in a small rocker in front of the kitchen stove. In spite of the growing heat from the sun, he seemed to be cold, shivering every now and then. He was bald, unshaven and rheumy. He didn't bother to look up as they came in.

Ma Chester led them through to a door at the far end. The room would have shamed an Eastside tenement. Dillon looked round, his face showing his disgust.

"I'll bring you some breakfast," the old woman said. She said it as if she expected a refusal.

Dillon said, "Yeah, and make it a big one."

When she had gone, pulling the door behind her, Dillon wandered round the room. "A thousand bucks for this," he said. "I'll wring that goddam chiseller's neck."

Roxy sat on the bed gingerly. "They'll never find us here," he said. "I bet Joe won't turn in much dough to the old girl. He'll keep it for himself."

Dillon went over to the window and looked out. Roxy watched him cautiously. Roxy was scared of Dillon. The horror of last night was still with him. Sitting there on the bed, he could relive everything he had done. They had found a big gravel dump off the road and had shoved her body into it, pulling the gravel down on top of her. Roxy shivered a little. Maybe they wouldn't find her for weeks, maybe they'd find her tomorrow.

Dillon said, "Snap out of it!"

Roxy jerked up his head. Dillon had turned and was watching him. "That broad never was no good," Dillon said. "She had it comin' for a long time. What could we do with her? If we'd left her, she'd've squawked. I know."

"Sure, sure," Roxy said hastily, "we'll forget it."

Dillon said in a threatening voice, "You'd better."

Just then Ma Chester put her head round the door. "You can eat now," she said.

The two men wandered into the other room. The table was covered with a soiled newspaper. Old man Chester was already eating. Dillon looked at him with disgust. The old man glanced up and grunted. Ma Chester said, "Don't you take any notice of him . . . he's deaf."

Dillon jerked a chair out and sat down. The food was poor and coarse.

Roxy said, "You gotta radio here?"

Ma Chester stood over the stove, watching the coffee. She shook her head. "Nope," she said. "We ain't got a radio."

Dillon cut the salty ham angrily. "I thought every farm had a radio," he said.

"Well, we ain't," Ma Chester snapped. "We're poor, see?"

"You're tellin' me," Dillon snarled.

The shack door opened and a girl came in. Both Roxy and Dillon stopped eating and stared at her. She was big. Her straw-coloured hair hung down to her shoulders. Her dirty cotton dress barely concealed her overripe figure. She was as tall as Dillon, with big hands and feet. Her features were regular and good, but the expression on her face and in her eyes was that of a child of seven.

She stood there shifting her feet, looking with scared eyes at the two at the table.

Ma Chester said, "Sit down, Chrissie; these two gentlemen ain't goin' to worry you."

There was a long awkward silence as she shuffled over to the table

and sat down. Then with a burst of confidence she said, "Did you come in that big car?"

Dillon glanced over at Roxy. Roxy said, "Yeah, that's right."

Chrissie smiled timidly. "We ain't got a car," she said, reaching out a large hand for some bread. "Can I go for a ride?"

Ma Chester snapped, "Don't you worry these gentlemen. You get on an' eat."

Chrissie began to bolt her food. She had an enamel mug of milk by her plate, and when she drank Dillon could see the milk running down her chin on to the front of her dress. He was suddenly aware of a sour smell coming from her, the same sort of smell small children have if they're not looked after. He felt a little sick and pushed his plate away. Then, muttering something, he got up.

Ma Chester said, "Here's the coffee." She banged a pot on the table. Dillon reached out and poured himself a cup and took it to the window. When Ma Chester went back to the stove, Chrissie leant forward and scooped the ham Dillon had left on to her plate.

Roxy laid down his knife. "You're hungry?" he said, for something to say.

She looked at him and gave a pleased little smile. "Yes, I am," she said. "Will you give me a ride, Mister?"

Roxy nodded. "Sure I will."

"You be quiet," Ma Chester said from the stove.

A sudden blank look came over Chrissie's face and she began to mumble. A little saliva ran down her chin. Ma Chester walked over to her and rapped on the top of her head with her knuckles, just like she was rapping on a door. Chrissie pressed her head against the old woman's breast, a look of contentment coming over her bovine face.

Ma Chester said to Roxy, "She's simple, but she's a good girl. There's something wrong with her head. She gets like this sometimes. I rap her nut like this, an' it helps her." The old woman's face had softened while she was speaking, and she looked down at the girl with a rough tenderness that quite altered her face.

Roxy sat there staring with a morbid fascination. "She's quite a big

girl, ain't she?" he said at last.

"She's eighteen," Ma Chester told him. "But I guess she's never grown up."

Dillon couldn't stand any more of it. He went outside. The hot sun was fast drying the heavy dew. The ground was steaming a little, and a faint white mist, extending as far as the eye could see, hovered just above the ground. The air smelt good and he was glad to get away from the staleness of the shack.

He walked over to the car and glanced inside. The back seat was stained dark with Myra's blood. He wrinkled his nose a little. This was a hell of a morning.

Over the way he noticed a well, and he went over and drew a bucket of water. Then, finding some rags under the front seat, he began sponging the mess away. He had just got through and had got rid of the water when Roxy came out.

Dillon looked at him. "I'm goin' to go nuts in this dump," he said. "Just wait until that chiseler comes out here . . . I'll kill him."

Roxy sat on the running board of the car and lit a cigarette. "Hell," he said. "It's somethin' to be safe, ain't it?"

"That loony gives me the creeps," Dillon muttered, shoving the back seat into place.

"Aw, she's okay . . . She's just a kid really . . . You look on her as a kid. She ain't goin' to worry you."

Chrissie came out just then. She edged over to them. "You've made the seat all wet," she said, looking into the back of the car. "Why have you done that?"

Dillon turned away. He spat on the ground. As he moved off, Chrissie said, "I don't like him," to Roxy.

Roxy grinned at her. "He's all right," he said. "I guess he's got somethin' on his mind."

Chrissie looked puzzled. "What?" she said. "How do you mean, somethin' on his mind?"

Roxy scratched his head. "You know," he said; "he's worried about

something.”

“Is that all?” She lost interest. “When are you taking me for a drive, Mister?”

Roxy said, “I can't take you now. Maybe tomorrow. But not just now. What do you do with yourself all day?”

She stood looking longingly at the car. “Aw, not much,” she said. “I play . . . I like playing best.”

Roxy eyed her over. He thought it was tough for a fine-looking broad to be so simple. “Well, let's play at somethin', shall we?” He felt a little embarrassed, but he was sorry for her.

She looked at him as if making up her mind whether he'd be worth playing with. Then she nodded.

Dillon had made a circuit of the shack and was standing watching them. A curious gleam came into his eye.

“Take her down to the river,” he said. “Get her to swim.” He said out of the corner of his mouth, “Get her goin'. She might be worth lookin' at.”

Roxy's face went a deep crimson. “You lay off that,” he said angrily. “This kid's simple, see? I ain't standin' for any of that stuff.”

Dillon stood looking at him, his face sullen. “Aw, go an' play dolls,” he sneered. “You give me a pain.”

He stood looking after them as they wandered away into the woods.

* * *

After two days on the farm Dillon was nearly crazy. He was nervous of walking too far from the thick woods. He was sick of sitting inside watching old man Chester, or listening to Ma Chester singing her son's praise.

Roxy, for something better to do, had turned his attention to the farm. Dillon was too lazy to do that. Chrissie followed Roxy about like a dog. She had got over her first shyness and Roxy quite liked her. She

was amused at most things he said, which flattered him, and she helped him with the work on the farm.

He was quite startled at her strength. She would think nothing of shifting heavy sacks or logs of wood, that made Roxy sweat to move. Under his directions, put in the simplest way, she carried out quite a programme. Sometimes she got bored and began to fool, then Roxy took her off for a walk.

Dillon watched them contemptuously. He made no attempt to join them. Roxy never discussed her when they were alone. Chrissie went to bed around eight o'clock, arid Roxy and Dillon played cards monotonously into the night.

It was Sunday, and Dillon was jittery. Joe Chester was coming out, and he'd have news. Cut away from the radio and the newspapers, neither of the men knew what was going on. Even Roxy couldn't get up any enthusiasm to play with Chrissie. He hung around the shack doing odd jobs, his eye on the dirt road.

It was after ten o'clock when Joe turned up. He came bumping along the dirt road in a new car. He looked mighty pleased with himself.

Chrissie was the first to spot him, and she lumbered down the road to meet him. Joe stopped the car and let her get in.

Dillon and Roxy watched them. Dillon said, "We gotta get this punk alone."

Roxy said, "Sure . . . we'll get him all right."

It was some little time before Joe could get round to them. Ma Chester and Chrissie were all over him. Even old man Chester wakened up and had something to say. By the time Joe shook them off, Dillon was in a vile temper.

The three of them walked into the wood, and when they were some distance from the shack, they sat down on the grass.

Dillon said, "Now come on, for God's sake. What's been goin' on?"

Joe gave him a worried look. "I don't like it," he said, wagging his head. "The Feds are raising hell."

"What you mean, raising hell? Got a newspaper with you?"

Joe shook his head. He seemed quite surprised at the idea. "No, I ain't got no newspaper," he said.

Dillon looked at Roxy, his face dark with fury. "What a guy!" he snarled. "Came from town an' ain't got the goddam sense to bring a newspaper."

Even Roxy was put out. "Why, Joe," he said, "I guess that's dumb."

"Dumb?" Dillon snarled. "Why . . ." he broke off, spluttering.

Joe looked concerned. "If I thought you guys wanted a paper, I'd've brought it."

Dillon nearly struck him. He clenched and unclenched his fists. "Listen, you bohunk," he said at last. "We gotta have a radio up here, see? I gotta know what's goin' on. I'll go nuts in this dump if I don't get some information through."

Joe nodded. "Sure, I'll bring one up when I get round again."

Dillon said, "You'll bring one up right away."

Roxy hastily said, "Well, come on, Joe, what's been happening?"

Joe looked glum again. "The Feds have been in to see me. They've been everywhere. They found the car you ditched not far from my place . . . I guess that was a smart thing to do."

Dillon demanded, "Do they know you've got this dump up here?"

Joe shook his head. "Nope," he said. "I guess they don't. Look here, Mister, it ain't goin' to be good for me or my folks if they catch you here."

"What the hell do you think I'm payin' you a thousand bucks for?" Dillon snarled.

"I was comin' to that." Joe shifted his eyes. "I guess I had a bad bit of luck the other day. I lost that dough in a crap game."

Dillon stiffened. "What the blazes has that got to do with me?" he demanded.

Joe picked at the grass, keeping his head turned. "Why, I guess maybe you're right. It ain't got a lot to do with you, but I just told you."

Dillon said, "See here, Chester, I gave you that dough to keep us under cover. If you've lost it, that's too bad, but it ain't our funeral, see?"

Joe shifted the conversation. "Ma tells me you've made a swell job of work with the old fence," he said to Roxy.

Roxy shrugged. "I'd go nuts tryin' to pass the time. I enjoyed doin' it."

Dillon said between his teeth, "Suppose you skip this an' tell me what's been goin' on."

"Sure I'll tell you." Joe leant back on his elbows, raising his skull-like face to the sun. "Well, you know how it is, the newspapers have been playin' the Hurst murder up. The Feds have been lookin' for you. Comin' round asking questions. Huntin' around; you know how it is."

Dillon said, "They don't suspect you?"

Joe shook his head. "Did I tell you they're offering five grand reward for you guys?"

Both Roxy and Dillon stiffened. "Five thousand bucks?" Roxy said unsteadily.

"That's right," Joe said: "I guess they sure want you guys bad."

There was a heavy silence while the two turned it over. Joe went on, "I rigger to some people five grand would come very nice."

He got to his feet. "I gotta get back to Ma. She gets mad as hell if I don't hang around when I'm up here. I'll be seein' you boys before I go."

He went away, his long thin legs moving stiffly through the grass.

Roxy said in a low voice, "Did you get it?"

Dillon clenched his fists. "He ain't gettin' another dime outta me," he said. "The double-crossin' rat."

"Listen, Nick, don't do anythin' foolish. If we don't square this guy, he's goin' to squeal. He said as much, didn't he?"

"How the hell do we know they're offerin' a reward?" Dillon raved. "Suppose they ain't lookin' for us an' this is a frame to skin me?"

Roxy shook his head. He was nervous. "I'd hate to call his bluff," he

said. "We don't stand much chance if the Feds come up here."

Dillon took his roll of money out of his pocket and thumbed it through. He had two thousand dollars and two fifty notes.

Roxy watched him. "Maybe he'd take the two grand an' call it square."

Dillon's hand shook with fury. "We give him this dough an' he can still turn us in," he said.

Roxy shook his head. "I guess he ain't that low. I know Joe, he wouldn't do that."

Dillon got to his feet. "I do the payin' an' save your hide," he snarled. "Ain't you got any dough?"

Roxy looked uncomfortable. "Hell, Bud," he said, "I ain't gotta nickel. I'm in this with you . . . Didn't I tip you what was happenin'?"

Dillon shrugged and walked towards the house. Joe saw them coming and came out walking to meet them.

Dillon said slowly, "Listen. This five grand reward comes tough on a guy like you. We wouldn't like you to lose by it."

Joe's eyes glistened. "You got me wrong, Mister," he said hastily. "I ain't hankerin' after the reward. I guess I'm glad to hide you guys up. I only said I'd lost the dough you gave me an' was a bit short."

Dillon's eyes hated him. "We figgered maybe two grand would set you up."

Dillon saw Joe hesitate. He saw the look of doubt in his eyes. He thought, the bastard's going to turn it down. He went on hastily, "Two grand can buy plenty."

Joe said, "Sure, it's mighty fine of you guys." His long bony hand came out. Dillon gave him the small roll of notes. Joe counted them, his hand shaking a little. The greed in his eyes scared Roxy.

Dillon watched him. "I expect some work for that," he said, keeping the rage out of his voice with an effort. "Don't go makin' mistakes, will you? We got your ma an' pa up here, Joe."

Joe's eyes opened. "You ain't got nothin' to worry about," he said quickly. "You've fixed me up fine . . . The Feds won't bother you if I can help it."

“You'd better see to that,” Dillon said viciously.

“Sure, sure,” Joe said hastily, “I'll see to that okay.” He seemed in a sudden hurry to leave. He ran towards his car and drove off rapidly down the dirt road.

Ma Chester came out and stood on the stoop. Her face had a sly expression as she watched Joe drive away. Chrissie came round the side of the house, calling to Joe loudly. Joe didn't look back.

Chrissie said, “Why's he gone like that? Ain't he comin' back?”

Ma Chester stepped down and went over to her. Roxy heard her say, “Joe's got business on . . . he'll be along in a little while. You oughtta be mighty proud of your Joe, he's a smart guy.”

Her little pebbly eyes mocked the two as they stood watching her uneasily.

* * *

Dusk was falling. Dillon sat on the stoop. His eyes were watching the sun sinking behind the trees. He was seriously worried. One hundred bucks was all he had left. One hundred bucks was as useful as a horse's tail.

He got to his feet restlessly. This dump was driving him crazy. He looked around for Roxy, but could see no sign of him in the thickening dusk. It was still very close, and a faint hot breeze fanned his face.

He wandered round the shack, glancing in the windows. He saw Ma Chester busy with a flat-iron. For a moment he stood looking at her, then his eyes shifted to old man Chester hunched up over the stove. Shrugging, he wandered on. The next window was a little higher, and he had to stretch to see in. One look made him stiffen to attention.

Chrissie was moving about in the dim light of a flickering candle, undressing. She pulled her clothes off with difficulty, her fingers fumbling awkwardly with the buttons.

Dillon remained there watching, until she blew the light out. A primitive animal feeling for her gripped him, so that he could only

stay there staring into the blackness of the room. The sudden realization that he had been cooped up in this shack for so many days without a woman came upon him with paralysing violence.

He was still standing there peering into the darkness when Roxy found him. Roxy said quietly, "What the hell you doin' here?"

Dillon started round. He looked at Roxy uneasily.

"I've been lookin' for you," he said, his mind still far away with his thoughts.

Roxy looked up at Chrissie's window. His face hardened.

"You didn't think I was in with the kid?" he said softly.

"Kid?" Dillon sneered. "She ain't no kid . . . she's a woman."

Roxy stretched out a hand and took Dillon's coat front. "Lay off that, Dillon," he said. "By God! Don't you start anythin' with that girl. She's good an' she's simple . . . I won't stand for it."

An overwhelming rage mounted inside Dillon. He flung Roxy's hand away. "Listen, you louse," he said. "You do as I tell you . . . If I want that broad, I'm havin' her—get it? You ain't stoppin' me, or any goddam heel like you."

Roxy stood very still. "If that's the way you feel . . ." he said.

Dillon couldn't quite see his face in the light, but he didn't like the threat in Roxy's voice.

He suddenly saw the danger of making an enemy of Roxy and he retreated hastily. "Forget it, will you?" he said surlily. "I guess the heat's worryin' me. I guess I was crazy."

"Sure." Roxy's voice was relieved. "I know how it is. This place gives me the jitters. Suppose we take the heap and get into town?"

Dillon nodded. "We'll take the Thompson. I guess they won't be lookin' for us to drive in." He was eager to get away. "An' say, I guess we can check up on that punk Joe. Maybe we'll hear somethin'."

Roxy said, "Let's go . . . We won't tell the old woman."

They walked quickly over to the shed where the car was hidden and quietly pushed her out. Dillon went back to the shack, passed through

the room where Ma Chester was working, nodded to her briefly and went into his own room. He picked up the Thompson, then, gently pushing the window up, he climbed out, dropping to the ground. He ran round quickly to where Roxy was waiting with the car.

“I guess we’re nuts not to have done this before,” Dillon said, sitting beside Roxy. “Suppose we stick up a service station? We want some dough badly enough.”

Roxy said, “Sure. Why not?”

They drove on into the night. Dillon sat with the Thompson on his knees, his eyes searching the dark road ahead for the sign of a light. He was nervous, but it felt good to get away from that shack.

After some time Roxy said, “Round the bend is one of those Conoco stations. We’ll drive up an’ get a tank full . . . If there ain’t any excitement, we might surprise ‘em.”

Dillon nodded. “Yeah,” he said. “You do that.”

Roxy slowed down, and they ran round the bend. The station was about a couple of hundred yards down the road. A big car was just pulling away, heading towards them. Dillon’s fingers tightened on the gun, but the car swept past.

An attendant was going back into the office when he spotted their lights. He stopped and stood waiting at the petrol pump.

Roxy drew up beside him. The attendant was a fair-haired youngster, his eyes heavy for want of sleep.

“Give her ten,” Roxy said.

Dillon pushed open the door and stepped into the road. The darkness and the shadow of the car hid him. He saw the office was empty.

Roxy said, “Get a move on . . . We ain’t got all night.”

The attendant called, “It’s in, Mister.” He screwed the cap home and came round to Roxy.

Roxy said, “Gotta paper I can look at?” He gave the boy a bill.

“Sure. It’s in the office. I’ll get it for you.”

Roxy opened the door of the car and got out. “I’ll come in with you,”

he said. "I guess I could stretch my legs."

He followed the attendant into the office. Dillon walked quietly behind them and waited just outside the door.

The attendant went to the till and rang the drawer open. Dillon walked in and rammed the Thompson into his back. "Take it easy," he said.

The attendant looked over his shoulder and gasped. He tossed his arms above his head. Roxy stepped past him and emptied the till. There wasn't much there.

"This all there is?" Roxy demanded.

The attendant was utterly terrified. He nodded his head. "Sure . . . That's all . . . Mister . . . honest, it is."

Roxy grunted. "Like bashin' a kid's money box," he said.

Dillon took the attendant by the arm and spun him round. He shoved him into a chair. "Know who I am?" he demanded. "I'm Dillon . . . the guy the cops are after."

The boy's face was blank. "I don't know you, boss," he said with a gulp.

"Didn't you know there's a big reward out for me?"

The boy shook his head.

"Where's that paper?" Dillon snarled.

Roxy had already found it and was looking through it. Finally he tossed it down. "Not a word," he said.

"Didn't I tell you?" Dillon raved. "It was a frame to skin me." He pointed furiously to the door. "Get out!" he shouted at Roxy. "Get in the car an' wait."

Roxy gave him a quick look, then he went out into the darkness and climbed into the car. As he settled himself he heard a sudden terrified scream. He put his hand on the car door, then hesitated. His hand fell to his side.

Dillon came running out. His face was like stone. "Get goin'," he snapped.

“What was that?” Roxy asked uneasily, as he engaged his gears.

“What you think?” Dillon snarled from the darkness. “Think I could let that punk run around and yap his head off?”

Roxy said nothing. He moved a little way away from Dillon. He said at last, “I guess we’d better get back.”

“Get back nothin’,” Dillon said, his voice gritty. “I’m goin’ to see Joe. Keep her goin’.”

They reached Joe’s place after a long run. The road carried little traffic, and the cars that swept past them didn’t bother them.

At Joe’s, Dillon got out quickly. “You stay here,” he said, “I’ll handle this bastard. Sound your horn if anythin’ starts.”

Roxy opened his mouth to say something, but thought better of it. He sat still, watching the road.

A light still burned in Joe’s room. Dillon walked quietly up the path. He tried the door, but it was locked. He rapped on the door with his knuckles. Roxy could hear him from the car. After a pause, Joe came. He stood in the open doorway, his mouth hanging slack.

Dillon moved the Thompson so he could see it. “Get inside,” he said through his teeth.

Joe fell back, his eyes glued to the gun. He couldn’t say a word.

Dillon forced him into the room and shut the door. “I’m on to you, you double-crossing sonofabitch,” he said. “Hand over that dough.”

Joe fumbled in his pocket and brought out the roll. He said in a quavering voice, “You got me wrong . . . I know you’ve got me wrong.”

Dillon snatched it from him. “Where’s the rest of it?” he demanded. “You know, the thousand you said you lost?”

Joe’s eyes widened. “I did lose it,” he gasped. “I don’t get this . . . what’s it all about . . . ain’t you stayin’ at Ma’s no more?”

Dillon said, “Give me the rest of the dough or I’ll blast you. . . My finger is itching . . . Snap to it!”

The Thompson was pointing at Joe’s vest. He gave a strangulated gasp.

“I'll get it for you, Mister . . .” he whined. “Don't you shoot . . . I'll get it.”

He stumbled over to the table and took another roll of notes from the drawer. Dillon made him count it. “I got the car—” Joe began explaining.

Dillon cut him short. “Come on out,’ he said. “I still got somethin' for you to do. You play ball, an' you'll come outta this okay, but you gotta watch your step.”

Joe went with him to the car. Roxy stared, but didn't move. Dillon pushed Joe into the back of the car, then he said to Roxy in a low voice, “Get to the river . . . quick.” He got in beside Joe, and Roxy sent the car shooting forward.

They rode in silence for a mile or so, then Joe said, “Where . . . where you takin' me?” He was suddenly uneasy.

Dillon looked for Joe's face in the darkness, saw the white outline and swung his fist. Roxy heard the soft spat as his fist crushed into Joe's face. Joe gave a muffled groan and slid forward in his seat. He ducked his head, holding his hands over his nose.

Dillon pulled his arms from his face slowly. He had to exert a little strength. Joe sobbed, “No . . . no . . .” Dillon said, “Here it is, you heel!” and swung his hand again.

Roxy slowed down. He peered ahead until he saw the glitter of water in the moonlight, then he stopped the car. “This is it,” he said.

Dillon got out of the car. He said to Roxy, “Get him out of there . . . I don't want to wash that heap again.”

Joe gave a scream. Roxy put his arms round him and half dragged, half pulled him out of the car. Joe couldn't stand. He put his legs down, but they folded up, so that he fell down in the road.

Dillon said, “Move the car up a bit.”

Roxy got in the car and moved it forward. Joe lay in the red circle of the tail lamp. Complete and awful panic seized him. He suddenly lost control of his sphincter muscle. Dillon shot him with the Thompson. Just one harsh roar of the gun and Joe was nearly cut in two, the slugs, like a steel knife ripped across his chest, killing him instantly.

Dillon said, "We gotta get him into the river."

Roxy leant out of the car. "I don't like touchin' him," he said. "I guess I just hate touchin' that guy."

"Get goin' . . . We might get company pretty soon." Even Dillon was slow off the mark. He put the Thompson in the car and they both walked slowly to Joe. They got him into the river. Standing on the bank, they watched the water close over him. The current was strong. They could see the rush of water in the moonlight. Joe would be taken care of for a little while.

Dillon reached forward and washed his hands in the river. He wiped them dry on the grass.

"I guess he ain't goin' to talk no more," he said, staring out across the swiftly moving river.

Roxy stood just behind him. In spite of the close night, he felt cold. His eyes were on Dillon's back. He suddenly shivered a little.

* * *

The next two days drifted by. Both Roxy and Dillon were on edge. They did not talk about Joe, but he was on their minds all right. On the morning of the third day it came as a little stabbing shock when Ma Chester said during the morning meal, "Joe's comin' out today. He promised to bring me some stores. I guess he'll be along pretty soon." There was a lot of pride in Ma's voice when she said it.

Roxy glanced up and looked across at Dillon. Then he pushed his plate away and got up. "Maybe he'll bring a newspaper," he said with difficulty.

Ma Chester began clearing the table. "If Joe said he'd bring a newspaper, he'll bring a newspaper. Joe is that sort of a guy. I always say you can rely on Joe."

A thin, mirthless smile went over Dillon's face. He followed Roxy out into the open. They wandered away together.

"Think the cops'll come on out here?" Roxy said quietly.

Dillon shook his head. "Don't seem like Joe talked about this place . . . We gotta keep an eye open, but I guess they won't."

Roxy sat on the side of the well. He lit a cigarette. Dillon could see his hands shaking. "We're takin' an awful risk stayin' here," he said at last.

Dillon put his foot on the edge of the well. "Where the hell else can we go?" he asked irritably.

Roxy shrugged. He didn't know. They remained there some little time discussing things but getting no farther, then impatiently Roxy got up. "I guess I'll go an' fix that fence. I'm almost through."

Dillon watched him go. When Roxy had disappeared round the side of the shack, Dillon saw Chrissie come out. She stood looking round for Roxy. Dillon kept his eyes off her face, and eyed her over from her neck down. A sudden tightness gripped him across his chest. He wandered slowly over to her, going slow so as not to startle her. She looked at him without interest.

"I'm goin' shootin'," he said when he reached her. "Suppose you come along an' watch."

Her face brightened a little. "I want Roxy," she said. "Where's Roxy?"

Dillon said as patiently as he could, "Roxy's fixin' the old fence somewhere." He took his gun from his holster and pretended to look at it. The gleaming barrel attracted Chrissie's attention. She moved forward, peering at it.

"Some gun, ain't it?" Dillon said, showing it to her.

Chrissie had forgotten Roxy. She stood with her head on one side, her eyes longingly fixed on the gun.

"Suppose we go into the woods . . . you can pop this if you want to," Dillon said thickly.

Chrissie's eyes opened. "Don't it make an awful bang?" she asked.

"Sure, but it won't scare a big girl like you . . . Come on an' try it."

He turned and began to move away. Chrissie hesitated. She didn't like Dillon, but the lure of the gun was too much for her. She followed him. "Can I carry it?" she asked, pleadingly.

Dillon took the clip out of the gun and jerked the bullet from the

chamber. He wasn't having her fool around and shoot him. He said, "Sure you can . . . You be careful with it."

She took the gun, holding it gingerly, her big hands nursing it like a doll. "Ain't it heavy?" she said. "I bet Roxy's got a bigger gun than this."

Dillon kept walking. He said, "Roxy ain't got a gun. When you can pop this good, we'll surprise Roxy . . . that'll be an idea."

Her face brightened. "I'd like that," she said, moving forward at a faster pace. "I'd like to surprise Roxy."

Dillon looked at her. He walked closer to her, the sleeve of his coat touching her arm. He put out his hand and touched her shoulder. The contact sent a little white-hot flame shooting through him. She shied away, her eyes suddenly nervous.

Dillon smiled. His breath whistled through his nose. "We got to get away from the house. They'll hear us shootin' an' spoil the surprise," he said.

Her mind switched back to Roxy, and her nerves quietened. Dillon didn't touch her again. The thick wood opened out into a clearing. Dillon stopped. "I guess this'll do," he said.

He sat down on the grass. "Come on down," he said, the pulse in the side of his head pounding. "I'll show you how to fix the gun."

She stood looking at him and Dillon tried to smile at her, but his face only grimaced. The look in his eyes frightened her. She moved back a pace.

Dillon took the clip out of his pocket. He tried to sound casual. "Gimme the gun."

She leant forward, holding the gun out to him but keeping away. There was a tense frightened look on her face which made Dillon think of some timid animal, not sure of itself. He took the gun, his hand touching hers. Again she took a step back.

Dillon slipped the clip in and jerked the lever, bringing a slug into the chamber. He said, "Sit down . . . I wantta show you how it works."

She didn't move. Dillon had the impression she was about to run away. He quickly turned from her. "Look over there," he said,

pointing across the clearing to a broken branch of a tree. It hung like a withered arm.

“Watch me pot it.” When he brought the gun up his hand was shaking. The gunsight nickered up and down, and he cursed softly. “Don’t you get scared with the row,” he mumbled. He knew if he didn’t start shooting and hold her interest she would go. He could feel the panic that was mounting in her.

The gun cracked. In the stillness of the wood the noise was startling. Chrissie sighed. Although the roar of the gun had made her flinch, she wanted to try.

Dillon said, “I guess I ain’t so hot . . . I missed it.” He tried again, gripping the gun until his hand sweated. He drew his breath in hard, holding it, then he squeezed the trigger. Again the gun cracked. This time a shower of splinters flew from the branch.

Chrissie clapped her hands. “Oh, it’s good!” she said.

Dillon didn’t say anything. He fired once more. The branch dropped a little. “Now you have a go,” he said, getting slowly to his feet.

Chrissie came up to him, her eyes fixed on the gun. She had forgotten him. Her mind was only for the gun.

He said with difficulty, “You stand here.”

She was quite close to him, her face intent and excited. Dillon turned a little sideways, slipping the clip out. He wasn’t taking any chances. He put the gun in her hand, then he moved a little behind her.

She stood, her eyes fixed on the branch of the tree.

“You hold the gun like this.” He put his hand on her wrist, raising her arm and pointing the gun. Her firm flesh burnt in his hand. He felt a little shudder run through her, but she was so anxious to fire the gun that she let him hold her.

The blood pounding in his ears, he gripped her round her waist with his other hand. He said thickly, “Don’t get scared . . . I ain’t goin’ to hurt you.”

The gun slipped out of her hand. It was forgotten immediately. The terrifying, tightening pressure of his hands sent her into a blind panic. She stood trembling, her eyes going wild. She began to mumble.

Dillon snarled, "Stop that goddam row!"

He jerked her close to him. Her weak, idiotic face sickened him, but her womanness got him. He turned her slowly stiffening body and crushed her close to him.

Then suddenly, like a released spring, she was gone from him. Her strength completely staggered him. He had had her gripped tightly, then his arms were powerless against the sudden heaving twist of her body. She sprang away, without looking back; she ran mumbling into the woods.

Dillon made no attempt to follow her. He just stood watching her, a feeling of sick frustration creeping over him. When she had vanished and the last sound of her flight faded away, he moved a little uncertainly, as if to pursue her. Then he stopped. Roxy was standing in the clearing, his face white, and his eyes gleaming dangerously.

"I saw you," Roxy said. "You rotten louse."

All Dillon's pent-up fury became centered on Roxy. Here was someone on whom he could wreak his rage. He began sliding across the grass, his eyes gleaming.

Roxy slipped off his coat. He let it fall at his feet. "I warned you once about that," he said through his teeth. "Now I guess I gotta hammer it home."

He came at Dillon with startling speed. Dillon didn't bother to protect himself. He had too much confidence in his own strength. He swung a long raking left at Roxy's head as he came in, but Roxy shifted a little, not stopping his rush, and Dillon's fist sailed over his shoulder.

Roxy got in close and hit Dillon in the body with two heavy blows. Dillon went crazy and missed with his wild swings.

Roxy kept stepping in and out. Every time he stepped in his fist thudded into Dillon, and when he stepped out Dillon missed him with a swing.

Dillon tried to get in close and wrestle, but Roxy kept going away, letting him have it as he rushed in. Dillon was getting a fearful lacing, but he didn't feel much; he was too mad to feel anything. Roxy hit him twice on the jaw as hard as he could. The blows sent Dillon's head back, but it didn't stop him.

That scared Roxy, and gave Dillon confidence. He began to get a grip on himself. He swung his usual wild left which Roxy was waiting for, and then he sent in a right which caught Roxy. The blow made Roxy sag at the knees. In went Dillon, taking Roxy's feeble left in his face, but getting two sledge-hammer punches to Roxy's ribs.

After that Dillon began to get it his way. He kept hitting and Roxy couldn't back away fast enough. He caught his heel in a tuft of grass and went over backwards. Dillon dropped on him, his great weight pinning Roxy flat.

Neither of them said anything. Roxy reached up and caught Dillon by the neck. He couldn't quite get under Dillon's chin. Roxy began to lose his head. His legs kicked wildly as he tried to shift Dillon. He could see the cold merciless face close to him and his strength began to ebb.

Dillon raised his fist and smashed it down on Roxy's upturned face. The heel of his hand caught Roxy across his nose. Roxy's hands fell away limply. Dillon shifted a little and had Roxy by the throat. He flung his weight on his hands. Roxy kicked a little. His eyes opened very wide, and his hands plucked futilely at Dillon's wrists.

Dillon panted, "You were always a smart guy."

He stayed there until Roxy died.

The two of them remained so still in the clearing that a small bird dropped from a tree and hopped towards them. With bright, suspicious eyes it watched them, its small head a little off one side. Then, as Dillon got slowly to his feet, the bird hastily took wing.

Dillon stood over Roxy, one of his hands touching his bruised face. Then he turned and stumbled back to the farmhouse. He cautiously approached, but no one seemed to be about.

Lying near the old barn was a pick and shovel. He carefully took them and turned back to the woods again.

The grave he dug for Roxy was a shallow affair, but it was away from the path and it would be difficult to find. He patted the soil flat and covered it with branches of trees. Then he stood up, beads of sweat on his face.

From behind a big clump of bushes Chrissie watched him with puzzled eyes, and when he had gone away she came out quietly and stood looking down at the grave. She knelt down and scratched at the loose

soil with her hands.

* * *

When Dillon had put the shovel and pick back he wandered into the fields. He wanted to think what he had to do. Would it be safe to take the car and blow? Would Chrissie put up a squawk? He guessed maybe she wouldn't. She might have forgotten what he had tried to do. She was crazy enough to forget anything.

He had got money and he had the car, but could he take the risk and go now, or would it be better to wait? He couldn't make up his mind. He wandered on, untroubled at the death of Roxy. When guys got in his way, he just trampled on them. He had got to live, he told himself, and the others had got to look after themselves.

Farther down the fields he ran into Ma Chester. She was working on the land, a long hoe turning up the brown soil. She paused, pushing back a grey strand of hair that hung over her eyes.

Dillon said, "Roxy's skipped."

She stood, leaning her weight against the shaft of the hoe. "What's he skipped for?" she asked. Her face showed her impatience to get on with her work.

Dillon shrugged. "I guess he was tired of bein' in this dump," he said indifferently.

"You ain't goin'?" she asked.

"I ain't goin' yet," he returned. "But I'll go all right."

Ma Chester wagged her head. "Joe ain't come," she said. "It ain't like Joe to say one thing an' do another."

Dillon made to move on. "Maybe he's busy," he said. That decided him, he'd go soon. He told himself he might even go that night. He went on, leaving her with her work. He didn't look back.

It was decided for him not to go that night. On a telegraph pole, several miles from the farm, he saw a notice. It carried his photograph. He stood there, his mouth going dry, reading the notice.

They offered five thousand dollars for him dead or alive.

A faint feeling of panic crept into him as he read. Here in the wilderness of hills was a picture, calling attention to himself. Anyone he met might recognize him. Anyone who suspected him could bring the Federal agents in their airplanes or their cars to seize him. He turned hastily and almost ran back to the farm.

He spent the rest of the day in his room, sitting by the window, watching. His nerves got so bad that the slightest noise made him stiffen.

He began to brood about Roxy. He couldn't bring himself to think that Roxy was dead. It would have seemed quite natural if Roxy had opened the door and come in. There was no one to grumble at, and he suddenly realized that there was no one to play cards with. That was serious. He had the long hours of the night before him with nothing to do, and sleep far off.

Well, Roxy had asked for it, he thought savagely. That guy had certainly narrow ideas. This brought his mind back to Chrissie again. He leant against the wall and thought about her. What went through his mind made him restless. He got to his feet and paced the room. He was nervous of going out in case he ran into her, and she raised a squawk. Maybe the old woman would get mad. He couldn't afford at the moment to have trouble with her.

He remained shut in his room until after sundown. Then, guessing that Chrissie had gone to bed, he went outside.

Ma Chester was dishing up the evening meal. She shot him a hard look.

“What's up with Chrissie?” she asked.

Dillon turned a blank face in her direction. “What's up with her?”

The old woman shrugged. “She's got a mood on, I guess,” she said a little wearily. “Ain't said a word since she came back.”

Dillon breathed gently with relief. “Maybe she's upset that Roxy's gone away,” he suggested, sitting down at the table.

The old man hobbled from the stove and sat down too. Ma Chester shook her head. She brought over a dish of food from the oven and put it down in front of Dillon.

“I ain’t told her about Roxy,” she said. “She might get excited.”

Dillon helped himself and shoved the dish over to the old man. “She’s gotta know some time,” he said.

“Ain’t Joe come yet?” the old man piped suddenly, not stopping his eating.

Dillon glanced up quickly. He didn’t say anything.

“I reckon Joe’s sick,” Ma Chester said uneasily.

Dillon ate in silence. He felt they would be glad to see him go to his room. After the meal was finished he got up and went outside. He sat on the stoop. The evening was very warm, and fluffy white clouds still drifted in the darkening sky.

He sat there brooding. The thought of his room without Roxy was unbearable. Every now and then Chrissie loomed up in his thoughts, and he hastily shifted, trying to push her image away.

He heard the old man going to bed. The old man had fixed habits. He took himself to the outhouse and then hobbled slowly back. He grunted at Dillon as he passed.

Dillon got to his feet and went back into the shack.

Ma Chester was washing up. He didn’t say anything to her, but shut himself in his room.

The dim flickering light of the candle made the shadows oppressive. He stood looking round the room, his nerves starting a little at every moving shadow. His eye fell on a bottle of Scotch that Roxy kept by him. He went over and took the bottle in his hand.

Dillon didn’t use any hard drink. He had disciplined himself years ago. Now he didn’t hesitate. He splashed the whisky into a tumbler and tossed the fiery stuff down his throat. He stood there coughing and spluttering, trying to get his breath.

The whisky did things to him. He felt a sudden rush of courage, and his jumping nerves relaxed. He filled the glass again and sat down by the open window. Outside, he could hear Ma Chester locking up. He could hear her plodding about the other room, then, listening carefully, he heard her blow out the lamp. The sound of her stumbling movements across the dark room came clearly to him. Then a door

shut.

He got up and took his candle from the mantelshelf and put it on the table. Then, for something to do, he checked his money. He put the pile of notes in front of him and counted them carefully. He made them into two separate rolls and put them in his pocket. Then he reached forward and blew the candle out. The moonlight made the room dim, and he went back to the window again and sat down.

His hand closed round the tumbler and he took a long pull at the Scotch. He held the liquor in his mouth for a second before swallowing it. His head began to feel a little light.

Chrissie came out of the dark shadows and peered at him. Chrissie called to him from the shadowy path outside. Chrissie sat at his elbow stroking his sleeve. Chrissie was everywhere in the room.

Still he sat there, letting the hours crawl past, the small glowing ember of horror of what he wanted to do slowly dying in his mind.

Then he got up. He leant down and took off his shoes. The hot darkness of the room lay heavily on him. He took a slow step forward and then another. His progress was silent. Opening the door, he stepped into the outer room. A faint gleam came from the stove, and the coal hissed a little. He moved on, trying each board carefully with his stocking foot before putting his full weight on it.

His hands touched the rough wood of Chrissie's door. He turned the handle and went in.

He could see nothing. It was as if he were blind. He closed the door gently behind him, his fingers easing the door so that it shut without a sound. Then he put out his hand and moved forward again, groping for the foot of the bed. The whisky fumes were tight round his brain, and he felt his legs lurch as he came forward. It seemed to him that he must have moved right across the room, and it startled him when his hand touched the cold rail of the bed.

He waited there listening. Faintly he could hear Chrissie breathing. Very faintly, as if she were a long way away from him.

He moved on, pressing his leg against the side of the bed to guide him. His hand touched the rail of the head of the bed. He crouched a little, his hands moving down, feeling very gently for Chrissie's throat. Hands that were ready to nip any cry that she might make.

His hands touched something. Something cold came to his touch. Something he didn't like. He drew his hands away. A little shiver ran through him because the thing he had touched was like nothing he knew. It scared him.

Angry with himself, he put his hand out again. His fingers encountered a face. He knew he was touching a face. He could feel the nose, and the eyebrows were rough to his touch. But the face was cold and leathery, not the warm soft face he expected.

With a catch in his breath, he snatched his hand away, and with trembling fingers he fumbled for a match. The sweat ran down his, face. He struck the match, which flared up with a little hiss.

He saw the outline of a body lying under the soiled sheet and, bending forward, he looked into the dead face of Roxy.

In the faint flickering light he could see the mud in Roxy's hair and nostrils. The light reflected in the glassy protruding eyes; across one of them a fly was moving with slow intentness.

Dillon's cry woke Chrissie, who had been sleeping in a corner away from the bed. She started up, terrified at the sight of Dillon standing there; and as she saw him, the match went out. Roxy's gun, that she had cuddled to her breast, went off in her twitching hand, and the bullet smashed into Dillon, sending him to the floor.

He had only a few seconds of pain before life went away from him.

THE END